

Improving the Performance and Outcomes of Child Welfare through State Program Improvement Plans (PIPS)

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THE REAL OPPORTUNITY OF THE CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES REVIEW

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Center
for the
Study
of
Social
Policy

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Introduction

For the past two years, state child welfare agencies have been engaged with the federal Children’s Bureau in implementing a new approach to accountability of state child welfare systems designed to assist states in assessing administration, practice, and results for children and families - the Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs). This new approach begins with statewide assessments using data on outcomes that agencies are trying to achieve for their client families and children, followed by intensive on-site reviews that involve close, in-person inspection of a sample of cases and interviews with an array of stakeholders. The next stage of this process is the development and implementation of a program improvement plan (PIP) based on the findings of the review.

The traditional view of corrective action plans, like PIPs, is that they are simply the follow-up to a federally conducted review. This paper’s perspective is different. PIPs are not the follow-up; they are the main event. The months-long statewide assessments, the intensive on-site reviews, and the subsequent “final” reports of the CFSRs are all preparation phases for state actions to make significant improvements in the way states conduct their child welfare responsibilities. PIPs can provide the roadmap for that action.

Early in the implementation stage for CFSRs, there was discussion about “passing” and “failing” the reviews, as though the CFSR were a federal final exam. The federal leaders of the process from the Children’s Bureau were usually careful to avoid the pass/fail language, very deliberately using terms such as “substantial conformity” or “not in substantial conformity” to national standards. CFSRs have not resulted in summative “grades,” but rather point out areas of strengths, where state agencies have met or exceeded national standards, and areas needing improvement, where states fall below those standards.

At the end of 2002, reviews were completed on 31 states and the District of Columbia. The results of those reviews show that none has achieved the level of the national standards on a majority of outcomes measures. Neither federal officials nor state agency managers have been surprised by these results. Perhaps

PIPs offer both substantive and political leverage to focus serious, sustained attention on a reform agenda.

a better analogy than the final exam for CFSRs would be a diagnostic screening. Recognizing that no system can boast full health for its child welfare system, determining the nature and extent of weakness in states' efforts to ensure safety, permanence, and well-being for children and their families is the crux of the CFSR exercise. But determining the problem without developing and carrying out an aggressive plan to find a solution is a waste of resources.

Each state, including the 19 states to be reviewed in 2003 and 2004, is engaged in a nationwide movement to improve its system of protective care for endangered children and their families. PIPs offer both substantive and political leverage to focus serious, sustained attention on a reform agenda.

This paper clarifies some of the most important themes emerging in the PIPs reform agenda and provides encouragement for all states to take full advantage of a unique opportunity to engage in change to positively affect the lives of many thousands of children and their families. This clarification is based on a close look at program improvement planning in five states - Alabama, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Vermont. Of course, these states are not necessarily representative of all states now planning or implementing PIPs; nor is there any suggestion that the plans of these states are the best. The states examined were among the first in the queue to be reviewed. Their child welfare populations and geographic regions are diverse, as the statistical summaries in the appendices indicate. The results of each of these states' PIPs is still mostly unknown. Whether each state plan will successfully lead to action that will reduce the incidence of child maltreatment, bring about speedier moves to permanence for children in protective care, enhance the likelihood that families can be restored and strengthened to raise their children, and help children in custody stay on a positive developmental course remains to be seen over the coming years. But these states have provided insights into variations in approaches that are useful in defining major principles and guidelines for the "main event" - changing the way child welfare is conducted to ensure better prospects for the children and families served by child welfare agencies across the country.

The following two sections of this paper present (1) background information on the federal legislative and regulatory context for CFSRs and PIPs, and (2) the principles and guidelines for program improvement. An appendix contains summaries of the PIP work that Alabama, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Vermont have undertaken together with a summary of federal legislation and executive actions that provide the framework for the new accountability approach.

1 The Starting Point for Reform: A New Approach to Accountability

The 1990s saw unprecedented federal-level activity focused on the challenges of child welfare. Soaring statistics of children in foster care, all too frequent child tragedies, and escalating federal payments to support state child welfare services convinced congressional lawmakers and administration policymakers that federal action was necessary.

In order to improve child welfare outcomes across the country, a series of legislative actions provided a framework for a new federal accountability initiative aligned to other general trends in government that moved focus from procedures and process to outcomes and results.

The legislative actions were:

- *The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993;*
- *The 1994 Child Welfare Amendments to the Social Security Act;*
- *The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act of 1994 and Its 1996 Amendments; and*
- *The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997.*¹

A common theme of the legislation and the resulting federal action was a new approach to accountability. Instead of a focus principally on what procedures a state did or did not follow in its child welfare work, the new focus directed state attention to the over-arching goals of safety, permanence, and well-being. As further defined by the Children's Bureau - the federal agency in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services with primary responsibility for administering the laws passed by Congress relating to child welfare - these goals should be reflected in the five basic principles guiding child welfare services:

- The safety of the child is the paramount concern.
- Foster care is a temporary setting, not a place for children to grow up.

1. More detail about the provisions of each of these Acts of Congress and the Executive Department's response to them is provided as an appendix ("Background – Federal Legislation and Executive Actions").

- Permanency planning efforts for children begin as soon as a child enters care and is expedited by providing services to families.
- The child welfare system must focus on results and accountability.
- Innovative approaches are necessary to achieve the goals of safety, permanency, and well-being.

Child and Family Service Reviews

The new review system, devised to turn an outcomes-based accountability approach into an operational system, was the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), put into the field in 2001. CFSRs began a state-by-state measure of seven outcomes that support the goals of safety, permanence, and well-being, and seven systemic factors deemed to be essential infrastructure requirements.

The legal framework and regulations establishing a new outcomes-oriented accountability assessment system provided an environment allowing federal policymakers to set high standards and engage states in efforts to identify issues and barriers to improvement. The new system also allowed states to develop blueprints for activities that could lead to better practice and improved outcomes for children and their families.

The field was ready for leadership and change. Virtually all states' child welfare agencies, to some degree, have been and continue to be under siege. Multiple class action suits, tragic deaths and disappearances of children in agency custody, difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified frontline and supervisory staff, and general "bad press" all have underscored a need for change. Consensus exists across the nation that child welfare services are not succeeding in its mission to provide safety, permanence, and the conditions necessary for well-being for the population of children and families who need its intervention and help. Processes such as the development of a set of child welfare outcomes measures in 1998 and 1999 and the feedback from the first round of state reviews have demonstrated an almost universal readiness on the part of state agency leaders to use the CFSRs and PIPs to foster positive changes in their agencies' work.

Child and Family Services Review (CFSR)

Seven Outcomes

Safety:

- *Are children, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect?*
- *Are children maintained safely in their homes whenever possible and appropriate?*

Permanency:

- *Do children have permanency and stability in their living situations?*
- *Is the continuity of family relationships and connections preserved for children?*

Well-being:

- *Are families' abilities to provide for their children's needs enhanced?*
- *Do children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs?*
- *Do children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs?*

Seven Systemic Factors Essential to the Outcome

- *Statewide information systems*
- *Service array*
- *Quality assurance system*
- *Case review system*
- *Agency responsiveness to the community*
- *Staff training*
- *Foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention*

The readiness to reform was further enhanced by the approach that the Children's Bureau used in developing CFSRs and defining performance measures. It was one of the most inclusive, consensus-building processes in the Bureau's history. Not only were representatives of state agencies involved in the CFSR development, the final version of the CFSR on-site review process established review teams composed of federal and state reviewers working as peers. The Children's Bureau also invited state agency reviewers from other states to participate in and learn from the on-site reviews. A follow-up meeting held after the first year of reviews became a mutual assessment of the strengths and issues of the process itself and continued the federal-state partnership that began in the initial development stage. Refinements and additional guidance from the Children's Bureau, based on the first year experience, supported smoother and more effective CFSRs in the second year.

PIPs: More than Compliance

Program Improvement Plans (PIPs) respond to the findings of the federal Child and Family Service Reviews.² To gain federal approval of its PIP, each state must set targets that will demonstrate improvement during the subsequent two-year period on each of the performance measures for which it is not in substantial conformity to national standards. These targets must move the state closer to the level of the national standards within a two-year timeframe. During the two-year program improvement period, each state must provide periodic reports to the appropriate federal regional office and may renegotiate targets or elements of their plans.

At the end of the two years, a second federal review will be conducted to determine whether the state has accomplished the improvements outlined in its PIP. In the event that the state's outcomes and performance measures fall below its targeted improvement level, financial penalties will be assessed against the state based on a percentage linked to the number of measures that fail to meet or exceed targets. The Children's Bureau has been clear from the outset, however, that the most important purpose of the CFSR-PIP endeavor is to initiate a process of continuous program improvement, not to assess fines.

What Makes PIPs Different

From a legal perspective, the CFSR-PIP process is like other federal-state accountability procedures. These federally prescribed reviews, with requirements for substantial conformity and penalties, inevitably focus state officials on the question "What do we need to do to satisfy federal requirements?"

However, each state should view its PIP as a way to go beyond mere compliance with federal requirements. Early evidence suggests that some states have embraced this difference and are using the PIP as an approach toward system reform.

2. By the end of 2002, all 31 states and the District of Columbia – the states reviewed to-date – were engaged in some phase of planning or implementing PIPs.

The following chart contrasts the new accountability approach embodied in CFSRs and PIPs with compliance to federal requirements embodied in previous federal monitoring and oversight.

<i>The Old and the New Accountability for Child Welfare Services</i>	
<i>The Old Accountability - Compliance</i>	<i>The New Accountability - CFSR & PIPs</i>
<i>Adherence to federal requirements</i>	<i>Strategic change</i>
<i>Penalty avoidance</i>	<i>Achievement of improvement targets</i>
<i>Vertical responsibility (to federal funding agency)</i>	<i>Horizontal responsibility (to families, community, state citizens)</i>
<i>Emphasis on “passing” the review</i>	<i>Emphasis on defining areas in need of improvement</i>
<i>Federal reviewers, with closely held decision-making about findings</i>	<i>Federal-state-peer review teams, with open discussion of findings</i>
<i>Paper-based review</i>	<i>Person-to-person and group interviews as input to reviews</i>
<i>Data collected for reports “upwards” to funding sources</i>	<i>Data used by supervisors and workers to spotlight opportunities to improve practice</i>
<i>Data as evidence of compliance-noncompliance</i>	<i>Data as basis for forming questions about adequacy of practice</i>
<i>Agency alone held accountable</i>	<i>Agency shares responsibility with stakeholders and community</i>
<i>Sanctioning poor performance</i>	<i>Empowering program improvement</i>
<i>Litigation</i>	<i>Shared problem-solving</i>

Six elements of the new CFSR-PIP accountability system converge have the potential to make PIP development and implementation the power train that will generate positive reform to achieve lasting results.

- 1. The new focus on outcomes provides a shared set of expectations and vision about what child welfare should be achieving.*
- 2. A clear emphasis on the role of frontline practice in achieving outcomes means that program improvement can be aimed at the essence of child welfare services.*
- 3. Combining data analysis and quality assurance holds promise of making these two previously discrepant tools of child welfare service assessment more powerful and effective.*

4. *Expanding engagement and responsibility to include many new stakeholders increases commitment, energy, and insight to achieve positive change.*
5. *Accountability that is bi-directional toward the federal government and horizontal toward the communities on whose behalf child welfare services are provided ensures longer-term support.*
6. *All states must engage in program improvement that is continuous and comprehensive and addresses the entire spectrum of child welfare services, not just single parts.*

These CFSR-required Program Improvement Plans are not dispersed among a few states, nor are they episodic, single-function initiatives; they engage all states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico in comprehensive agendas. Each of these potentially important elements of the new accountability system is discussed in more detail in the text that follows.

First Element: The Focus on Outcomes

Without exception, child welfare professionals have lauded the move to accountability that focuses on results instead of procedures. There are some criticisms by state officials about various specific definitions and measures incorporated in the reviews.³ Those disagreements, however, have been minor in view of the overarching consensus in the field that outcomes supporting safety, permanence, and well-being provide a fair and appropriate framework not only for holding state agencies accountable for the expenditure of federal funds but also for generating real service improvements.

The five guiding principles of child welfare services enunciated by the Children's Bureau shortly after enactment of the Adoption and Safe Families Act served as the foundation for building a framework of performance outcomes that all could endorse. Working together with federal staff, child welfare leaders have translated those principles and goals into outcomes of fewer children misplaced into out-of-home care; shorter stays in care for those whose protection requires placement in foster homes; more appropriate and targeted services to assure that children's "welfare" is not further harmed by the system's intervention to keep them safe; and adequate attention to their families' roles, rights, and responsibilities.

3. A frequent criticism from a growing number of state agency officials, supported by nationally respected experts in child welfare data and statistics, is current reliance on "point-in-time" data regarding children in out-of-home placements, rather than on longitudinal data that track entry cohorts of children. They argue that the latter approach provides much more accurate information about actual changes in state performance.

Second Element: An Emphasis on Practice

Outcomes-based accountability inevitably leads to the recognition that the quality and the frequency of interactions between the families of children in need of protection, child welfare workers, service providers, and community/neighborhood supports are fundamental to achieving desired outcomes. The CFSRs are turning the spotlight on front-line practice issues such as accurate child and family assessment, family involvement in case planning, sibling placements, parental visits, and post-reunification follow-up services. Findings from CFSRs are leading states, in their PIP development, to reconsider tools of child welfare casework such as concurrent planning, family-team decision-making, and multidisciplinary teams. A focus on outcomes has made it clear that positive change in child welfare does not occur primarily through agency reorganizations, enactment of new laws or regulations, improvement of data systems, or changes in the financing of services, although any of these systemic changes might usefully be brought to bear in the cause of reform. At its core, successful reform requires improved practice where caseworkers and service providers meet families and develop a relationship.

Third Element: Integration of Data and Quality Assurance

Effective PIPs attempt to integrate aggregated data to track progress toward achieving outcomes with assessment of the quality of work with individual children and families. This unique characteristic of the child welfare reform effort under-girds both the focus on outcomes and the emphasis on practice. PIPs can embrace the same theme and structure of the CFSRs which rely on both the state data and the on-site review's in-depth assessment of sample cases.

Integration of data analysis and case-driven quality assurance has not been easy. States' data systems are extremely complex and costly. They are still in various stages of development and have received different degrees of acceptance by agency personnel from front-line workers to state-level administrators. On the other hand, qualitative reviews pose new challenges for agencies whose quality assurance systems frequently have relied on paper-oriented process reviews. Quality assurance calls for engagement of all the relevant parties in assessing what is happening for children in need of protection and their families. This kind of engagement includes the children and families themselves, as well as service providers, court personnel, and advocates. Quality assurance activities face barriers of time, confidentiality rules, and constrained fiscal resources.

Nevertheless, state agencies crafting and carrying out PIPs recognize that the general, (conveyed by the aggregate data) and the particular, (revealed by intensive, person-to-person reviews of what is happening to actual families) must be combined in order to move toward positive, agency-wide results.

Fourth Element: Stakeholder and Community Roles

As a starting point for reform, the CFSR process has recognized the crucial role of stakeholders - the critically important “other players” in improving outcomes for children and families. Usually, the term stakeholder is limited to providers of services for children and families who are not part of the child welfare agency. CFSRs explicitly direct attention to a wide range of stakeholder roles. Some states have used the CFSR process to engage judges and court personnel, provider and other agency stakeholders, foster parents and community members not only as sources of qualitative information as the on-site interview process requires, but also as partners in PIP development. Yet, after excellent stakeholder engagement during the statewide assessment stage and as part of on-site reviews, their involvement in the ongoing process of implementing PIPs appears rare.

Without exception, states visited as background for this paper identified the juvenile or family courts as their principal partners in child protection and family-strengthening and as crucial players in program improvement. Others usually mentioned as having essential roles in assuring well-being for children in protective custody included foster parents, mental and physical health service providers, substance abuse treatment agencies, domestic violence programs, and public schools. Indeed, the CFSR process makes it possible for states to define CFSRs as an assessment of an entire system of services and supports, not just an assessment of the single agency assigned primary responsibility. The CFSR and the program improvement efforts that emanate from it become the responsibility of all participants in the system, including the courts and service providers.

Less often included in the “stakeholder” category are advocates and community members who are not court personnel or on staffs of other public or private child and family service organizations. Significant program improvement efforts open the door for engaging new and potentially essential partners, including faith-based organizations, community and neighborhood councils, businesses and chambers of commerce, legislators, and the press. The CFSR assessment instrument points to the community at large as a source of information on the effectiveness of child protection and child welfare. It does not, however, require

involvement of community members as participants capable of making significant contributions in those efforts. By implication, however, the circle of engaged stakeholders can be expanded to make the religious community, service organization members, volunteers, retired professionals, and others part of the stable of stakeholders ready to help child welfare agencies carry out their work in better ways.⁴ Alabama, in particular, has developed a quality assurance program as part of its consent decree compliance efforts that engages over 1,300 people from all parts of the community and from differing disciplinary perspectives.⁵ The state intends to engage these community members in the quality improvement process of its PIP.

Fifth Element: Accountability to the Public

The CFSR has provided a template in some states for greater public attention to (and greater public responsibility for) a state's child welfare program. Public awareness of child welfare seems to be shaped by newspaper articles about

Oregon stands out as a state that very deliberately “faced the press” with its own shortcomings when its CFSR final report arrived from the federal government.

physical child abuse and child deaths. While it appears that few states have used their CFSRs to full advantage as a platform for public education about the real mission of child welfare agencies and the resources needed to provide child welfare services, there is a potential for extending accountability to include tax-paying citizens — especially residents of the communities of the children needing protection and the families needing help. Oregon stands out as a state that very deliberately “faced the press” with its own shortcomings when its CFSR final report arrived from the federal government. Georgia has the advocacy community a major part of its CFSR

and its PIP development process. Their inclusion has served to educate citizen advocates about the vexing and demanding aspects of front-line child welfare

⁴ For more information about neighborhood and community involvement in child protection, visit the website of the Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare, a part of the Center for the Study of Social Policy, available at www.cssp.org. Foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention

⁵ From *Making Child Welfare Work: How the R.C. Lawsuit Forged New Partnerships to Protect Children and Sustain Families*. (Washington, D.C. Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law), 1998.

work. Bringing the public more explicitly into child welfare has resulted in extra support from the Georgia state legislature.⁶

Sixth Element: Nationwide, Comprehensive Reform

Finally, another characteristic that strengthens the potential of PIPs to bring about effective, lasting, and positive change in child welfare is the fact that all of the states are engaged - or soon will be engaged - in program improvement, addressing the entire spectrum of child welfare services, not just single parts of the system. To be effective, a commitment to program improvement must be continuous and comprehensive. Unfortunately, most previous efforts to make positive changes experienced conditions that made lasting improvements unlikely. The new conditions for program improvement contain elements that may be able to counteract earlier problems.

New Conditions Assist in Program Improvement

- *Sharing a common, national, outcomes-oriented framework, rather than undertaking reform isolated from other states;*
- *Undertaking reform statewide, rather than limiting efforts to selected communities or metropolitan areas; **
- *Addressing the entire spectrum of child welfare, rather than focusing narrowly on single functions (child protection, foster care, or adoption); and*
- *Focusing on the full range of child welfare practice, rather than on selected procedures (case review systems, workforce reorganizations, or decision-making timeframes).*

**Child welfare-related class action suits against state agencies have provided the exception to the geographic limitations of most previous efforts to achieve reforms. Alabama is the example provided in this study, but others including Kansas, Illinois, the District of Columbia, and currently Tennessee and Connecticut, have undertaken statewide measures of improvement under court order.*

States are already profiting from each other's experiences. Communications among state agencies at meetings and conferences serve as a principal means of learning and information-sharing. Of course, there are differences in states' PIPs,

⁶ While Iowa is not due for its on-site review until May 2003, its state agency also has been deliberately proactive in making public the process and the results of its statewide assessment and early findings of areas needing improvement.

based on the findings of the CFSRs themselves and on the priorities of each state. The Children's Bureau has recognized the significance of informal peer-to-peer consultations, perhaps in part as a result of peer involvement on CFSR review teams, and has moved to provide more formal support for those efforts. It has charged the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning⁷ with responsibility for facilitating mutual assistance among the states beginning in 2003.

⁷ This National Resource Center is one of ten resource centers funded by the Children's Bureau with mandates to provide significant amounts of technical assistance to states at all points in the CFSR-PIP process. The others are: The National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center, the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice, the National Child Welfare Center on Legal and Judicial Issues, The National Resource Center for Community-Based Family Resource and Support

2 Key Features of Effective PIPs

Experience demonstrates that several factors are essential to the effectiveness of a state's PIP. These elements are not listed in priority, rather all may be equally crucial to success. They include making priorities; communication; statewide scope of reform; stakeholder engagement and collaboration; innovation; self-direction; and leadership. Each factor is discussed in further detail in the following text.

A. Priorities

Findings of CFSRs can be overwhelming, especially when read with a “pass-fail” perspective. In their PIPs states are responding to CFSR reports that find most

Alabama is one of the states that has identified better decision-making and more careful tracking of time-in-care as a PIP priority, in response to findings in their CFSR of long length of stays in out-of-home placement.

of the outcomes not in conformity with national standards, each of which is important. Faced with an agenda crowded with items that need improvement, states' PIPs can become a laundry list of improvement targets, each with its own set of action items meant to change nonconformity into conformity. Three points can be raised to argue for a strategic, targeted approach to program improvement, rather than one that is an all-encompassing checklist.

- First, not all of the areas needing improvement are equally egregious in their weakness. States that have decided to take a priority setting approach to program improvement have spotlighted concerns that appear the most problematic. Whether they are issues of safety, permanence, or well-being, some findings from

Programs (FRIENDS), the National Resource Center for Information Technology in Child Welfare, the National Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, the National Resource Center for Special Needs Adoption, the National Resource Center for Youth Development, and the National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment. More information about these resource centers is available on the Children's Bureau website at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/links.htm.

Vermont's four broad themes for improvement – quality assurance, foster and adoptive parent recruitment, assessment/documentation, and permanency planning/placement stability – serve as an example of making priorities while maintaining comprehensiveness.

New York's twelve strategies provide a variation on a priority-setting PIP. They are:

- *Support for strengths-based, family-focused practice;*
- *Concurrent planning implementation;*
- *Safety and well-being for children in congregate care;*
- *Permanency options, including permanency mediation;*
- *Adolescent services and outcomes;*
- *Development and piloting of a differentiated protective services response (dual track);*
- *Workforce development;*
- *Workload management;*
- *Improvement of statewide information systems;*
- *Tribal consultations;*
- *Improvement of relationships between courts and the child welfare system; and*
- *Improvement of cross-systems collaboration and increase in service array and access.*

the review rightly claim more concerted attention than others. Unacceptably long stays in out-of-home placement is a common one. Both Alabama and Oklahoma have identified better decision-making and more careful tracking of time-in-care as a PIP priority, in response to findings in their CFSRs of long length of stays in out-of-home placement.

- Second, because each element of child welfare is so integrally related to other elements, focus on one priority outcome necessarily has effects on other parts of the system. These effects can, of course, be negative as well as positive. From the positive perspective, for example, a priority to reduce the aggregate time in out-of-home care inevitably raises questions of the quality and the timeliness of early assessments of the child's need for protection, the family's capacity to provide and/or to change, and services that can be brought to bear in meeting the family's needs. Issues of concurrent planning, consistency of case management, supervision, and court involvement become essential complements to the overriding concern about children's need for timely decision-making to achieve permanence. From a negative perspective, however, less careful emphasis on a priority for change, such as "reducing the numbers" related to children's time in foster care, can lead to child endangerment, unnecessary destruction of families, and foster care recidivism, when practice concerns take second place to changes in aggregate data.
- Third, choosing and limiting priorities for program improvement allows a state to emphasize the real bottom line - the well-

being of the children for whom the child welfare system has responsibility. Both for internal and external communication purposes, priorities can be explained in terms of the children who are the beneficiaries of a reform agenda in a way that is not possible with a diffuse set of targets and action steps. New York and Vermont have both demonstrated this approach well by tying their plans to their basic operational framework and statement of principles, respectively. Vermont's statement of principles is a clear enunciation of a focus on the child and the child's family. New York's operational framework is a more functional statement, defining the set of child- and family-focused purposes to which the agency is committed.

B. Communication

The accountability implicit in PIPs involves changes in the way individual workers and organizational entities within child welfare agencies do their work. The fear of many - and even the prediction of some - is that the multi-million dollar effort that has gone into CFSRs and now into PIPs will end up as an expensive exercise in process and paper and many hours of intensive human effort - resulting in very little real change. Key to preventing that gloomy scenario is concerted, constant, and careful communication from top to bottom within child welfare agencies and extending outside the agencies to reach all stakeholders and the community-at-large.

PIPs' focus on making measurable improvements in outcomes for children and families takes communication to a level of concreteness that previous, more process-oriented efforts to bring about change have lacked. An outcomes orientation makes it possible for agency leaders to rely on facts rather than rhetoric. Furthermore, the facts are relevant to all parts of the agency, especially front-line workers and their supervisors. Data are a principal component of communication. The states that are pushing their data down to the unit and even the caseworker level and translating their data into understandable words and graphs are turning communication into a tool for ongoing accountability, evaluation, and even case planning. Oklahoma's plan to develop the "dashboard" as a frequent at-a-glance update on the agency's performance is a unique example of communication of hard information in support of practice changes. On a single card (which could be hooked to a car's visor or visibly fixed on a desk), progress toward meeting improvement targets will keep Oklahoma's PIP before the eyes of agency managers. Vermont's one-page, periodic *PIP Points* serves as another example of communication in action. The content of a recent edition of *PIP Points* can be found on the next page.

PIP POINTS (from Vermont) PIP: Placement Stability Goal Revision

Placement stability

In July 2001, Vermont received its official report from the Child and Family Services Review. The final results were generally good and include strengths in child safety outcomes while confirming the need for improvements in the areas of permanency and well-being. In the area of permanency, the review confirmed that we face significant challenges in ensuring stability of placement for children and youth in custody. Stability, as defined in the review, is two or less moves in the first 12 months of out-of-home care.

Why a goal revision?

The Program Improvement Plan (PIP), which was approved by the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) in March 2002, contains a goal to "Identify additional services and supports to promote placement stability, with a focus on stability of children ages 6-11". The approved activity for this goal was to develop a plan to support the improvement of this outcome. The new plan must be approved by the ACF as a revision.

How was the new goal developed?

During the summer of 2002 a workgroup was appointed by management to conduct a Placement Stability Systems Analysis, which guided the Division in creating the plan to improve this outcome. The analysis examined several factors that contribute to placement stability/instability for children in out-of-home care, with a special focus on children entering custody between the ages of six and eleven. Components of the analysis include: child profiles by age groups, the most frequently needed services, a description of the current system of care, and a compilation of children's experiences with our system.

What is the new goal?

The analysis reinforced the fact that there are many variables responsible for the stability/instability of children in our care. Therefore, the revised goal contains activity in many areas, including:

- *Structured decision making*
- *Resource family recruitment and retention*
- *Division reorganization*
- *Mental health assessments*
- *Foster family peer support*
- *Foster family assessment*
- *Kinship care*

Want to learn more?

If you are an SRS employee you will soon be able to access the Placement Stability Systems Analysis in the Outcomes folder in SRS Forms. Others may contact Cindy Walcott at the address or number below. If at 241-2669 or sduranleau@srs.state.vt.us.

While firm conclusions about the role of communication in successful child welfare reform cannot yet be derived, there is good reason to predict that if communication is a major key in the success of child welfare reform it will be a feature that will require constant effort. The communication effort should not be confused with a “roll-out” plan or a one-time set of orientation sessions conducted by state agency central office staff for county and local managers and workers; rather it will need to be an infusing current of information whose purpose is to keep all parts of the system and those who support it and criticize it from the outside, apprised with up-to-date status reports on outcomes and plans to improve them.

C. Statewide Scope of Reform

Most states encompass widely varying communities - economically, racially and ethnically, culturally, and also in population density. The CFSRs focus on only three sites within a state from which to draw the sample cases for the quality assurance reviews. One of those sites must be the most populous jurisdiction within the state, and the other two are chosen to be representative, to the extent possible, of the remainder of the state. The statewide assessment

Each of Oklahoma's 77 counties sets three priorities for improvement following its annual "continuous quality improvement" reviews.

and statewide data counter-balance the limitations of only reviewing cases from the three sites. PIPs are not similarly constrained, however, except by decisions to allocate sufficient resources to the quality assurance system that a state puts in place to track its program improvement implementation.

For truly effective state child welfare reform, “statewideness” must be seen as an essential factor. For purposes of political support from state legislatures and governors as well as for reasons of equity for children, no part of the state should be left behind in the move to

improve the prospects of children and families in the child welfare system. Many states have recognized and embraced this fact. California's state legislature adopted the Child Welfare System Improvement and Accountability Act of 2001 requiring that the state Health and Human Services Agency develop a review system modeled on the federal Child and Family Services Review approach and begin implementing it in January 2004 in every California county. Oklahoma instituted, even before the CFSR on-site review, an every-county quality

assurance review system using the same assessment tool used in the CFSR. Oklahoma's PIP calls for every county to set three program improvement targets from among the performance areas found in need of attention and to track progress toward achieving them in the year following the county-level review. States such as Alabama, with the experience of statewide court-ordered reform under consent decrees, have previous experience of statewide reform and know the challenges of county-by-county or region-by-region efforts; but they also know that reformed public services cannot be limited in geographic scope, even though the aggregate data might reflect significant improvements by focusing only on high-population jurisdictions.

D. Stakeholder Engagement and Cross-System Collaboration

Defining stakeholder in the most expansive possible way, PIPs can better ensure real lasting improvement through involvement of other agencies and citizens of communities that child welfare agencies serve. There are relatively few state-level examples of this kind of collaboration in serving vulnerable families, especially those who come to the attention of child protection agencies; but every aspect of an outcomes-based accountability system argues for an end to the isolation of public child welfare services from external stakeholders. Drawing upon interested professionals from many different quarters, Alabama's county-level and state-level quality assurance committees present a promising example of shared responsibility for program improvement. Alabama's system, which engages citizen reviewers in every county to carry out qualitative case reviews on a regular schedule, predates the CFSR and PIP development. It is not surprising that one of the state's strengths noted in the CFSR findings was the richness of the array of services available to children in the system. Volunteer reviewers with personal connections to many of their communities' resources often bring a new level of commitment to meet families' needs to their engagement with the child welfare system.

Child welfare officials - like their colleagues in other health and human service fields - met the results-focused accountability systems that began to spread throughout government in the mid-1990s with the disclaimer that they alone could not guarantee positive outcomes from their programs. They pointed out that the outcomes of their services were heavily dependent on the general (usually economic) environment and on the contributions of other agencies or sectors. In the case of child welfare, they cited most often the roles of courts, health and mental health care services, and substance abuse treatment agencies.

Their response is right; alone, they cannot do what they are charged to do. Yet, the mandate to produce results has not gone away. The only alternative to declaring failure and giving up is to engage others in collaborative efforts to achieve good outcomes for children and families.

Vermont is able to refer many young children reported for protective intervention to high quality child care programs and close their child protection cases.

The implications of serious stakeholder/community involvement in child welfare services are major, especially in light of the other elements of child welfare reform considered in this paper. Increased stakeholder and community involvement can lead to shared responsibility among agencies and reduced caseloads for child welfare when families begin to receive necessary services that will keep them intact while enhancing their ability to nurture their children. Vermont serves as a model of community involvement. The child welfare agency's reliance on referrals to the early childhood development/child care community, as an effective service system for the youngest

children reported for suspected maltreatment, means that its caseload of preschool children is relatively small, with relatively few repeat reports requiring protective intervention.

Stakeholder involvement that goes beyond other service systems to include citizen boards and advisory committees or other forms of citizen input can help make communities as aware of what is happening to their most vulnerable children and families as they are of their employment/unemployment statistics, the strength of their business economy, the academic standing of their schools, or their real estate development plans.

E. Innovation

Program improvement is almost always synonymous with innovation. The findings of CFSRs document that current ways of responding to families reported for child maltreatment and providing care for children in need of protection have not produced the results that child welfare seeks to ensure. PIPs should open doorways to carefully crafted experiments that push beyond the traditional boundaries of child welfare.

New York's Office of Children and Family Services has engaged support of the family court system to experiment with mediation services that divert child protection cases from court.

The defining elements of the CFSRs and the other “key features” of PIP reforms suggest the most salient areas for innovation. Perhaps the most important area is practice where the call for new approaches is urgent. Innovative approaches range from differential responses that match the differences in children’s safety needs and families’ capacities to meet those needs, to new configurations of case planning and case monitoring, to new uses of mediation as alternatives, to court involvement, to uses of group work with families of children in care and in post-reunification and post-adoption circumstances. Among the most promising practice innovations are those related to family involvement in child welfare through such approaches as family team decision-making,

family conferences, greater involvement of fathers and paternal extended families, and other practices that ensure significant family roles.

A second area where innovation has been demonstrated at local levels but is yet to become statewide policy is in expanded stakeholder involvement through community partnerships. Two focused demonstrations provide useful models for consideration as states undertake PIP-directed reforms. First, the Family to Family program, now established at sites in 15 states with support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, offers a system-wide change affecting out-of-home placement, generating major changes in both front-line practice and in community investment in and support of networks of foster homes. In addition, four communities - Jacksonville, Florida, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, St. Louis, Missouri, and Louisville, Kentucky - sites where the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation initiated the Community Partnerships for Child Protection in 1995 have become beacons of innovation as they demonstrate the whole-community approach to achieve improved outcomes for children and families.

Some innovations may not be new in concept, such as more extensive use of relative care, concurrent planning, family team meetings, and multidisciplinary case reviews, but these concepts are completely new in practice in some jurisdictions. Oklahoma’s very deliberate attention to fathers and fathers’ families as alternative placement and treatment resources stands out as an example of

innovative practice. New York’s legislature endorsed the notion of innovation as an essential element of program reform in 2002 by authorizing funds transferred from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) to support locally determined program improvement experiments.

F. Self-direction

The states most likely to achieve their PIP aims are those that embrace program improvement as an agency-wide cause, independent of outside requirements. The legislative, regulatory, and guidance material development beginning in 1994 and extending to the CFSR reports, PIP approvals and monitoring by federal regional offices create a general sense of an “other-directed” reform movement. However, the extent to which some states have made PIPs their own is growing. For example:

- In Oklahoma, pride of ownership, excitement about their tracking and feedback innovations, and a laser-like focus on changing practice at the county level characterized the Continuing Quality Improvement (CQI) unit of the Children and Family Services Division. There was no reference that federal requirements or expectations motivated their work.
- Oregon demonstrated self-direction by its independent decision to target one of the federal indicators of timeliness in moving children to adoption. Oregon contended that measuring the average length of time to adoption could produce unintended and negative consequences by rewarding inappropriate adoption practice. They proposed an alternative measure to reduce the median length of time to adoption, which was accepted by the federal regional office.
- Prolonged negotiations between state officials in Albany and the New York City federal regional office/Children’s Bureau delayed approval of New York’s PIP well into a second year following completion of its on-site review. Meanwhile, the legislature voted funds for program improvement, and state plans defined the 12 strategic areas for a PIP that addressed the state’s own sense of what it needed to achieve. In July 2002, the Office of Children and Family Services declared the beginning of its PIP, without federal approval, and began the process of rolling out plans through a series of regional meetings with county directors and staff in the fall.

These examples are not meant to highlight states that are deliberately uncooperative with federal partners in the cause of child welfare reform. Rather,

the states' actions demonstrate real partnerships where their course of program improvement can and should reflect the concept of creating an internally driven motivation to pursue positive change.

G. Leadership

Leadership is an essential element of program improvement in child welfare. One of the lessons learned from site visits is that the contributions of the people who state agency heads have charged with leading the development

Career staff in child welfare agencies in Oklahoma, Alabama, and New York pointed to clear endorsements from state political leaders as significant factors in making their PIPs more likely to succeed.

and implementation of PIPs are far greater by those who are enthusiastic, committed, and thoughtful. Generally, they are mid-level managers, often without large staffs and sometimes in organizational structures without direct line authority over actual delivery of child welfare services. For some, their prospects of successfully moving their agencies into effective implementation depend more on their ability to negotiate and to convince than to direct and require. Higher-level support for their leadership responsibilities was evident in several instances. Where there was clear endorsement from political leaders, staff expressed certainty regarding the crucial role of that support. The unsolicited references by staff to the Secretary's or the Commissioner's interests and concerns about PIP

progress in Alabama, Oklahoma, and New York serve as examples. In Alabama, the Commissioner attended an all-day meeting for development of this paper and explicitly committed ongoing support for the PIP process. In Oklahoma, staff noted that the Director of Human Services (with cabinet rank) had specifically requested update reports on efforts to improve children's length of stay in foster care. In New York, the Commissioner's support was essential for legislative action to transfer TANF funds to support efforts identified in the state's PIP for program improvement.

These comments about leadership could, of course, be ascribed to leading change in any area of public service. However, there are two other elements of leadership that are specifically relevant for child welfare reform. First, it appears that a knowledge of child welfare policy and practice is highly desirable for

leadership of PIP development and implementation. Because the basic change that PIPs seek to achieve is at the practice level, leadership efforts to bring about that change are better provided by individuals who understand the complexities of child welfare cases and who can speak the language of child welfare supervisors and workers. Second, leadership of PIPs calls for continuity and longevity. In the case of all five states visited for this report, there was continuity from state-level leadership of the CFSR through PIP development and into the beginning phases of PIP implementation. Effective PIPs depend on state agencies' capacity to rely on leaders with the ability and the experience to comprehend the total process, from statewide assessments through tracking PIP progress, and the commitment to stay the multi-year course toward child welfare reform.

3 Conclusion

States' child welfare program improvement plans document their commitment to positive change. PIPs can transform a general intention to do better into a concrete set of results-oriented, highly focused strategies aimed at changing the way agencies, their partners, and the most affected communities are able to meet the challenges of safety, permanence, and well-being for children and families.

PIPs are the charters for a new kind of accountability in child welfare. An outcomes-focused approach to accountability takes on new dimensions starkly in contrast to previous approaches used in “holding agencies accountable.” Previously, monitoring and oversight were often seen by child welfare agencies as a “gotcha” game with unsympathetic outsiders holding all the power. The new accountability replaces externally driven assessment with reviews conducted in partnership. It has the potential for converting federal officials who previously were solely responsible for judging state agency performance into both accountability agents and enablers, engaged with states in defining and achieving improvement.

In addition, an outcomes-focused approach to accountability can free public agency administrators and managers to pursue more effective performance with other partners rather than having to restrict information, plan in isolation, and defend agency deficiencies.

Of course, there is no guarantee that states will use their PIPs as guides toward a reformation that makes the basic principles underpinning the goals of safety, permanence, and well-being the overwhelming rule of child welfare practice. Sustained political will and state level commitment are crucial to whether states grasp that this is an historic opportunity to achieve reform in child welfare.

Likewise, there are potential roadblocks:

- Although the federal role in this reform partnership, carried out through ongoing CFSRs, timely PIP negotiations, and ongoing tracking of progress, provides an extremely effective framework for reform, this role depends on

continued strong political endorsement from administration and congressional decision makers. State leaders generally confirm the high quality of Children's Bureau staff leadership over the first two years of CFSRs and PIPs. Technical assistance available through the federally supported resource centers and information clearinghouses provides both crucial help and knowledge for the journey.

Recognizing that both the mission and accountability of child welfare can and must be shared, may be the most essential change to advancing a reform agenda.

- States' 2003 budget crises provide a compelling excuse for giving up efforts to achieve challenging targets in PIPs, to enrich the quality of practice on the frontline, and to reach out to other agency and community partners. The pressures on governors and legislatures to meet balanced budget requirements by cutting funds for services to children and families, who have few advocates speaking on their behalf, are already tremendous.
- The case for the responsibility of the public-at-large for child protection and child welfare has yet to be made in a compelling way.

Expenditure of public funds for services that address a broader population, such as public education and publicly funded health insurance - not to mention highways and transportation, criminal justice, and even parks and recreation - garner the support of the public in general as well as an array of effective special interests. The lack of understanding about public responsibility for child welfare may lead to the loss of crucial support before PIPs have a chance to prove that major, positive change is possible.

- Reform that seriously and systematically engages and shares responsibility with stakeholders and communities requires a major culture change for most child welfare agencies. From front-line workers to top administrators, adoption of a new kind of openness, recognizing that both the mission and accountability of child welfare can and must be shared, may be the most difficult challenge of all. It also may be the most essential change to advancing a reform agenda that will achieve better results for children and families.

These realities can significantly impede reform efforts. But, addressing the issues by vigorous pursuit of program improvement, carried out as a visible, open, and public process that draws in stakeholders and communities, deserves a serious chance to succeed.

Appendices

ALABAMA: *Program Improvement with a Cast of Thousands*

Some Statistics on Alabama's Children and Child Welfare – 2002

- *Estimated number of children under 18: 1,123,422 (2000 Census)*
- *Reports of child abuse and neglect: 1.8 per 100 children in population*
- *Substantiated child victims: .6 per 100 children in population*
- *Children entering foster care: 2,960 (2,267 new admits/693 re-admits)**
- *Children leaving foster care: 2,782**
- *Children adopted: 320 Placements, 218 finalized*
- * *Children in their own home and related home placements are excluded from this count.*

Alabama's Department of Human Resources (DHR) hosted the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) in April 2002. The review's findings cited major strengths in the child welfare system in Alabama, including its access a wide array of services to prevent out-of-home placement of children and to stabilize families after reunification. Specifically, federal reviewers found the state's effectiveness in meeting children's physical health needs to be a notable strength. Overall, the state met six of the seven systemic factors - all except the factor related to case review processes. The state did not substantially conform to six of the seven outcomes.⁸

DHR submitted its Program Improvement Plan (PIP) in September 2002.

Organizational Context

Alabama's child welfare system is state-supervised, county-administered. An appointed commissioner leads the department and reports to the State Board of Human Resources, chaired by the governor. The Family Services Partnership is a division of DHR located at the state level, with monitoring and consultation/assistance

responsibilities linked to the 67 county-level Departments of Human Resources. Each county department has its own advisory County Board of Human Resources.

⁸ The one outcome in substantial conformity was related to safety.

The most important contextual element of Alabama's system is a 1991 consent decree ordered by the U.S. District Court, resulting from a class action suit brought against DHR on behalf of "R.C." by the Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program. The decree cited issues of unnecessary removal of children from their homes, failure to reunite children with families, overuse of expensive treatment facilities, and lack of sufficient attention to permanency for children in the state's care. The consent decree established principles, rather than prescriptive directions, to govern DHR's reforms, with a requirement that DHR develop a plan to address them. In making the decree, the court required appointment of an independent monitor that both parties agreed upon, and one that is mutually agreed upon by - and independent of - both parties to the lawsuit.

The state implementation plan responded to the consent decree's requirements that it specifically make practice changes including individual service plans for each child and family and implementing a "system of care" (a concept developed in the mental health services field). The system of care was to be the primary responsibility of DHR staff but extended further to include the array of service providers needed to meet child and family needs. The implementation plan also laid out a comprehensive framework for self-monitoring through provision for county-based, state-assisted quality assurance to ensure attention to changes that would constitute full compliance.

Determination by the federal court of whether the state had achieved substantial compliance with the decree, or "conversion" from a court-monitored to an independent status is anticipated to occur in the near future. County-by-county, DHR is turning its attention from final affirmation of compliance by the court monitor, with plans for the last of its counties to "convert" from the court's oversight, to the new issues of "sustainability." As the full emphasis on technical supports and state-level quality assurance reviews had targeted the last, most challenging counties to achieve substantial compliance, state DHR staff recognized the importance of bringing a renewed focus of consultation and technical support to those counties that had been the first to "convert" to the principles of the consent decree.

The quality assurance approach devised by Alabama to move counties forward under the consent decree deserves special note as context not only for Alabama's federal CFSR and its follow-up but also for the CFSR system nationwide. Much of the basic protocol for the federal CFSR being deployed by the U.S. Children's

Bureau grew from seeds planted first in Alabama. The Office of Quality Assurance, within the Family Services Partnership, initially developed and has continued to carry out a system of qualitative case reviews and quantitative data analyses of child welfare services administered by the county departments. This ongoing monitoring system differs only in degree from the final procedures incorporated into federal CFSR procedures.

Alabama's Program Improvement Plan

At the time of this case study, Alabama's PIP had not yet received federal approval. The basic approach that the state intended to take, however, became clear in the course of the site visit, although the details were not yet publicly available.

The Process of Improvement

The Office of Quality Assurance in the Family Services Partnership has the key role in the implementation of Alabama's PIP, just as they have had during the process of bringing the consent decree to a conclusion. The structure that DHR managers believe has served it well will be continued as the state pursues a dual track of program improvement related to the federal review and "sustainability" of reforms accomplished to comply with the consent decree.

Alabama's quality assurance system will continue to be a critical and foundational component of DHR to ensure maintenance of an acceptable level of practice and system performance statewide. The Office of Quality Assurance, within the Family Services Partnership, has eight staff members who maintain close collaboration with two staff persons responsible for data analysis.

The unique feature of Alabama's organizational commitment to continuous improvement - and thus of its PIP - is its extensive use of volunteer citizen participation in Quality Assurance Committees. Each county has such a committee, ranging in composition from 12 to 30 members, depending on the size of the county. Across counties, committee membership can draw from a number of sources including: retired professionals from social work, mental health, law, and education; adoptive and foster parents; homemakers; religious leaders; former recipients of agency services; private industry; and citizen advocates. Members contribute considerable amounts of time to regular, in-depth, qualitative review of cases for which county DHRs have responsibility. Committees review between 8 and 24 cases each year, based on county population and caseload. They use the same case review instrument that the

state quality assurance team uses when it conducts qualitative case reviews, as well as the same rating approach and write-up of case review findings/recommendations used by state QA staff.

Committees conduct their own special studies to explore particular issues, related to practice, organizational infrastructure and, in some instances, particularly problematic cases. In one county, complaints by foster families, client families, and service providers about inability to communicate with child welfare caseworkers led to a committee recommendation for an updated telephone system with multiple lines. Other county committees have explored issues of high incidence of repeat maltreatment, multiple placements involving four or more moves for some children, and permanency delays, particularly for those children who have been in foster care for periods exceeding 13 months. Each county DHR has a liaison that links the committee to the department's managers. The county agencies welcome committee member participation in permanency staffing sessions and often make special efforts to schedule meetings to accommodate committee members' attendance.

At the state level, a state Quality Assurance Committee connects county committees into a statewide network. This committee receives information on child fatalities within the state and submits an annual report of its work and findings, as a component of the state Title IV-B annual report. As part of planning for sustaining the consent decree reforms, DHR is reviewing the work and functions of the state committee with a view to expanding its monitoring and review responsibilities. Since late 1996, the state quality assurance office has carried out its own on-site reviews, which typically occur over a three-day period. The reasonable expectation of number of reviews to be conducted in a calendar year is between 12 and 15. The agenda for subject counties typically calls for a re-review of at least four cases already reviewed by each of the county committees. Using the prescribed scoring protocol, one purpose of conducting re-reviews is to assess the capacity of county QA committees to conduct qualitative case reviews. A second purpose is to assess the effectiveness of the "feedback loop" between the county QA committee and the county department, in terms of how responsive the county department is to the committee's recommendations.

Across the state, Alabama can boast a cadre of over 1,300 volunteer citizens who perform the quality assurance role for its child welfare system.

The Commissioner has affirmed the centrality of Alabama's quality assurance system to its child welfare system. Although it was designed as a feature of the state's process to achieve relief from the court-ordered consent decree, which is coming to an end, he notes that it is now more important than ever. All parties to the consent decree have agreed that quality assurance is the key to continued improvement. In fact, Alabama leaders avow that "R.C." has had an extremely positive impact on the quality of child welfare in the state and promises an ongoing commitment for state and county staff to continuous improvement of their system. The state DHR has decided to carry out its PIP using the same process of quality assurance monitoring devised under the consent decree.

Alabama is in the midst of a long-term effort to develop and implement its Statewide Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), known as ASSIST. DHR's final goal is to have a data system that is easily accessible through a web-based environment, a feature that it hopes to deploy as a pilot in February 2003. The experience of preparing for the federal CFSR highlighted data system problems, including difficulties with creating appropriate case samples and problems with the validity of AFCARS data on which the statewide assessment depended. While the state recognizes an ongoing challenge to implement a unified data system that will serve needs ranging from federal data requirements to casework supervision, staff admit that the current system hinders their primary desire to improve casework practice and thus achieve better outcomes for families. On the other hand, they also affirm that the data analysis provided by the current system is crucial to their quality assurance work and, for some counties, both managers and quality assurance committees review and use the data as basic tools for diagnosing issues with their caseload management.

Concerns in the Pursuit of Program Improvement

Alabama's concerns start at the basic level of caseworkers' activity. State staff express pride in the strides their agency has made over the past decade. The findings of the CFSR on the systemic factors tend to confirm the legitimacy of their pride. They express fundamental concern, however, about the frontline workforce who are the most crucial component of continued progress. A 25-percent caseworker turnover rate, a 60-percent rate of relatively inexperienced supervisors, and problems of recruitment undermine the quality of casework and show up in case-level problems with inappropriate use of foster care placement, delays in permanency decision-making, and other performance

issues with direct effects on achieving positive outcomes for children and families. As a county-based child welfare system, workforce continuity and quality concerns are not consistently spread across all counties and tend to be most intense in urban settings, where child welfare caseloads are often the most challenging. One way the state is addressing the staffing issue is in the hiring of a recruitment specialist, whose responsibilities include disseminating information on the needs for child welfare staff and diligent efforts designed to attract individuals to the workforce who are committed to the social work profession and interested in child welfare.

From a systemic perspective, the state has taken steps to try to address one aspect of this issue - namely, adequate salary levels to attract and retain workers. Pay Study I, just completed by DHR, succeeded in revising a pay scale for caseworkers to match the pay scale for other state agencies. DHR is about to launch Pay Study II, with the intent of assessing and making recommendations that can bring public child welfare remuneration levels into parity with the salaries offered by private service providers. Competition for qualified staff is a particular concern in metropolitan areas such as Jefferson County (Birmingham).

At a statewide system level, a second concern is on integration of the various components necessary to maintain the quality improvement momentum generated by the consent decree and now affirmed in the PIP. These components include consultation and technical assistance with the counties, the quality assurance process, the development and promulgation of policy, and staff training. Linked to this system integration concern is an often-heard anxiety about information management in the face of quality assurance reviews and ASSIST-generated data providing what is characterized as “vast” amounts of information.

Alabama’s concerns also mirror those of many other states with respect to the courts. Here too, the positive impact of the consent decree process, together with the passage of the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (1997), have converged to promote collaboration focused on achieving mutually affirmed outcomes for families. Continuous improvement from the vantage point of the courts has called for continuous training - for judges, guardians-ad-litem, court personnel, caseworkers, supervisors, and lawyers for DHR - to ensure that all understand the common protocol related to permanency and are equipped to implement it. Staff specifically highlighted the value of leadership institutes for judges, together with a system of judicial mentoring, which has been tried in at

least one county, related to child welfare-court practice and decision-making. In another county, the juvenile court judge has directed his court-appointed guardians-ad-litem to make home visits with child welfare caseworkers and to attend ISP meetings on the cases for which they are responsible.

As one state leader put it, Alabama's DHR, together with its court partners and other involved stakeholders, is trying to be one of the best child welfare systems in the country. As it nears the end of over a decade of federal court supervision and having completed its first CFSR, there is much talk about "sustainability." In reality, Alabama child welfare leaders make clear that their purpose is not to sustain what has been achieved, but rather to move forward with a continuous commitment to program improvement for Alabama's system of care.

New York:

Stitching Together a Quilt of Improvements

Some Statistics on New York's Children and Child Welfare – 2001

- *Estimated number of children under 18: 4,695,810*
- *Reports of child abuse and neglect: 3.25 per 100 children in population*
- *Substantiated child victims: .8 per 100 children in population*
- *Children entering foster care: 15,066*
- *Children leaving foster care: 16,402*
- *Children adopted: 3,237*

The Child and Family Service Review of the New York child welfare system began with submission of its statewide assessment in April 2001. In June 2001, the on-site review focused on New York City, Fulton and Westchester Counties. After delays caused by data discrepancies between statewide AFCARS data and the case findings of the on-site review, the final report was completed in January 2002. At the time of the site visit for this report (November 2002), the New York Office of Children and Family Services and the federal regional office in New York City had not come to final agreement on the terms of the program improvement plan.

New York's CFSR found the state to be in substantial conformity to outcomes related to safety (children maintained safely in their own homes whenever possible) and well-being (continuity of family relationships, meeting of education needs, and meeting of physical health

needs). Areas requiring the most significant program improvement fell in the permanency outcomes category, with particular concern about length of stay in foster care for children with plans for both reunification and adoption. The review also cited need for improvement related to child and family assessments, family involvement in case planning, and meeting mental health needs - areas related to the well-being outcomes category. Among the systemic factors, reviewers found that the statewide information system, the case review system, and service array fell below the standards for substantial conformity.

While agreement on terms of the PIP is still to be achieved, New York's child welfare agency actually began PIP implementation in July 2002. Taking a

strategic planning approach, it has outlined 12 strategies, backed up by action steps, to achieve child welfare outcomes, with workgroups established to develop and track most of the strategies. The metaphor that has already become a part of New York's ongoing improvement work is the "quilt," with workgroups and individual coordinators committing themselves to stitch together each strategic area into a comprehensive reform of child welfare in the state.

The Organizational Context

New York's child welfare system is state-supervised, county-administered. The five-year-old New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) has two program divisions, led by deputy commissioners, one of which is the Division of Development and Prevention Services (DDPS). Child welfare is one of the service areas for which DDPS is responsible. The state exerts its leadership and support for child welfare at the county-level service system through a network of six regions. Five of the regions include geographically defined sets of counties; the sixth relates to New York City's five boroughs, which are organized under the New York City Administration for Children's Services. County-appointed commissioners lead the county/district departments of social services and report to county executives or, in the case of New York City, the Commissioner of the Administration for Children's Services.

In other county-administered systems, this organizational structure to carry out the state's responsibility for child protection mirrors the relationship of the federal government with the states. The work with children and families is a local/county responsibility in New York. A central office in Albany defines policy; distributes funding; provides technical assistance directly and indirectly; collects, analyzes, and disseminates data; and monitors service delivery to assure accountability. It carries out these functions through its regional offices, which have the most direct and regular relationship with the county departments. Within the framework of policy, funding guidelines, and accountability requirements, the counties have flexibility to manage their own programs and devise their own service approaches, resulting in variations among the counties in the type and quality of services that they make available to the children and families. This variety also contributes to the quilt metaphor, because New York has deliberately chosen to define program improvement, in part, as a process of using whatever program flexibility is available to find new and better, locally responsive approaches to achieve the basic outcomes that support child safety, permanence, and child and family well-being.

An important feature of New York's organizational context is the OCFS Operational Framework, published in a second edition in May 2002, just before the state began the implementation stage of its program improvement plan. The goals set forth in the operational framework are:

- Improved safety and well-being for all children, youth, families and communities, including safety from crime and violence;
- Promotion of self-sufficient families and individuals;
- Protection of the State's most vulnerable populations, particularly its children, from violence, neglect, abuse and abandonment; and
- Securing permanency for children and youth in out-of-home care by safely returning them to their parents or a relative, facilitating adoption or providing support for a successful transition to self-sufficiency.⁹

While serving to frame the work of an agency with multiple programs, including child care, adult protective, visually handicapped, and juvenile justice services, the three-part foundation of child welfare - safety, permanence, and well-being - is a clear component of these goals.

The operational framework includes guidance about actual operations by outlining the components of a cyclical (rather than a linear) service continuum. The starting point and the ending point for the cycle of services is the community. At the broadest point, engaging the most children and families, are voluntary community supports available to all community residents, offering assistance that enhance the likelihood that families can provide for themselves and maintain stable, nurturing environments for their children. At the next level are early interventions, offering family support assistance when signs of problems first become evident. The third level is home-based responses, addressing the needs of fewer families with more intense problems and more intensive services. Examples of this level of the service continuum are in-home supervision with more directed family support, like home visiting and parent mentoring, in cases of children who have been the subjects of child maltreatment reports and diversion of juvenile offenders from detention facilities to community-based, supervised programs. Out-of-home placement defines the fourth level, required for a still smaller population, for whom home-based responses are insufficient to ensure safety and to move toward a stable, nurturing home. Finally, post-placement reintegration brings the circle back to its beginning in the community,

⁹ New York State Office of Children and Family Services, "Operational Framework - Second Edition," May 2002.

with a successful conclusion to the permanency plan that directed the course of services during both home-based and out-of-home interventions.

The state's operational framework concludes with operating principles that set the context for the development and implementation of the state's program improvement plan. At each level of the service continuum the principles apply, and services should be:

- Developmentally appropriate;
- Family-centered;
- Community-based;
- Locally responsive; and
- Evidence- and outcomes-based.

The Program Improvement Plan

The operational framework, revised subsequent to the CFSR but before formulation of the final program improvement plan was finished, serves as the basis for the strategic plan that New York is using to move toward needed improvements. That plan outlines 12 strategies:

1. Support for a strengths-based, family-focused practice;
2. Concurrent planning implementation;
3. Safety and well-being for children in congregate care;
4. Permanency options, including permanency mediation;
5. Adolescent services and outcomes;
6. Development and piloting of a differentiated protective services response to allegations of child maltreatment (dual track);
7. Workforce development: staff recruitment, retention, and professional development;
8. Workload management;
9. Improvement of statewide information systems;
10. Tribal consultation;
11. Improvement of relationships and interface between the family court and the child welfare system; and
12. Improvement of cross-systems collaboration and increase in service array and access.

Each strategy receives the attention of a coordinator and/or a work group composed of central office and regional office staff. In keeping with the quilting metaphor, work group coordinators meet monthly, either via conference call or in person, with time allotted for in-depth discussion of one or more of the strategies or sub-strategy areas at each meeting.

This strategic approach contrasts with most states' program improvement plans that follow directly along lines of the federally defined outcomes and focus specifically on targeted, measurable improvements. In fact, several outcomes can be implicit in a single one of the 12 strategies, and a single outcome may be embedded in multiple strategies.

The first strategy area, support for strength-based, family-focused practice, is the most complex, with eight subsets, each with its own action agenda. The range of improvements that Strategy 1 embraces includes better assessment of families at intake, review and adoption of family conferencing for early engagement in case planning, finding fathers and employing the use of parent advisors and advocates, improving case planning and case plan reviews, making family visitations more effective, improving the assessment of children's behavioral and mental health needs to make better placement decisions, providing better supports to foster parents, and refining quality assurance and monitoring to support continuous improvement of practice. Within this strategy area, the state seeks to support county-level child welfare agencies in meeting a number of outcomes, including: reduction of repeat maltreatment; achievement of more timely and effective permanency decisions; enhancement of well-being concerns such as family connections and mental health service needs; and strengthening of systemic elements such as quality assurance, data systems, and case plan reviews.

OCFS will be relying on regular data from CONNECTIONS (New York's SACWIS) to monitor progress and to translate that progress for federal reporting. In addition, the central office will provide six-month data "packages" to the counties and, in between report periods, it urges counties to access the New York data warehouse. These data provide managers with the ability to find what the Deputy Commissioner calls the "choke points," where a county may be underperforming the state as a whole or the region of which it is a part. Those points can be used to diagnose problems and bring new approaches to bear in finding solutions. The data for specific counties and units of workers within the counties also serve as the basis for targets for improvement that is negotiated between county and regional OCFS staff.

The state's PIP sets state-level targets in response to the CFSR's findings of need for improvement. Data packages distributed to counties and ACS define discrepancies between actual performance and those targets. OCFS has so far defined measures and targets related to six of the national standards and is crafting alternative measures, using entry cohort data, related to time to adoption and reunification (permanent exits from out-of-home care with a target of a 10 percent reduction and a 5 percent reduction in the use of care days). It has set a target a 10 percent improvement in the rate of maltreatment recurrence and a 10 percent improvement (or the national standard, whichever is lower) for placement stability. The data packages serve as a reporting mechanism and a challenge to county/borough-level agencies to improve performance as measured by these data points.

In future data packages, the staff in Albany will provide data on an alternative to the federal measure for reentries of children who were discharged during the PIP period (a quality control measure that addresses potential precipitous discharge in pursuit of shorter stays in out-of-home placement). They also intend to promulgate a more precise measure of maltreatment in out-of-home placements that differentiates foster home and congregate care, as well as county-certified foster homes and voluntary agency-certified homes.

The state office has designed a quarterly report form for the coordinator of each strategy in the PIP to use for updating progress. The form includes a place for reporters to indicate barriers to progress that they have encountered.

To initiate the program improvement implementation process, OCFS held a forum in each of its six regions in October 2002. The outline of New York's approach to program improvement can be gleaned from written materials that have been widely available during both the period that state, regional, and county leaders were formulating the plan (with the input and help of stakeholders within the state) and in the subsequent roll-out period. Those materials provide the skeleton of the reformed system that OCFS envisions - a family-centered, community-based, results-oriented child welfare system. But the vitality of New York's improvement plan can only be understood by listening to the people who are engaged in carrying it out, to their commitment and their personal versions of the state's vision for endangered children and their families. The forums provided state leadership an opportunity to share that sense of purpose and to hear county-level leaders' almost universally positive responses.

The core message at New York's regional forums had to do with the urgent need to respond to the findings of the CFSR with changes in casework practice. The Deputy Commissioner, who presided at each of the forums, labeled practice as "the most important conversation." He noted that the pressing issue uncovered by the state's CFSR was length of stay in foster care, both for children with permanency plans for reunification and for those with plans for adoption. Defining the program improvement process as a "mandate for practice change," he pointed out that the only way to achieve safety, permanence, and well-being for children for whom the child welfare agency has responsibility is through practice change. Furthermore, that change is, for New York, necessary for fiscal, programmatic, and finally for moral reasons. In keeping with a primary focus on practice, the forums became the venue for speaking of the CFSR program improvement plan in different terms - as New York's Practice Improvement Agenda.

The Deputy Commissioner pointed out that New York's focus is broader than the required federal two-year window for change and that it would require longer to accomplish; but the federal program improvement requirements provide the state with leverage for change. Indeed, even though New York is facing new fiscal challenges like all other states in 2003, the New York legislature voted for a Quality Enhancement Fund of \$2 million from TANF funds, allowing a flexible pool for use in testing new service models. The state awards Foster Care Block Grants to the counties, and state funds (as distinct from federal Title IV-E funds for foster care maintenance) can be used flexibly. State leaders are challenging county administrators to make use of their flexibility to "squeeze the middle," i.e. the costs of out-of-home placement, in order to have more resources to allocate to the early intervention and home-based parts (the "front end") of the service continuum and to post-placement reintegration and supports for emancipating youth/independent living programs (the final level). In addition, OCFS, with encouragement of the state court system, is urging increased use of mediation services in child protection cases, both to enhance the role of families in case planning and to reduce procedural drags on timely decision-making for children in care.

Two Reflections and Two Concerns

New York is big. Its population - nearly 19 million in 2000 - is about 60 percent greater than the total combined populations of Oregon, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Vermont. Its heterogeneity, in terms of urban-rural density, race and ethnicity,

family income, education levels, patterns of immigration and population growth, and many other characteristics, plays out on a grand scale in comparison to most other states. The challenges of child welfare reflect the complexity and size of the population. As in the case of California, also populous and county-administered, the challenges of child protection in New York City alone (or Los Angeles County) far outstrip most other states.

Recognizing the challenge of a large, heterogeneous population, one of New York's frequently voiced issues with the federal program improvement process has to do with time. New York leaders contend that two years is not enough. Three to five years makes more sense to them as they move to turn a complex, multi-county system into one that delivers services in a more family-centered, community-based manner. From the perspective of Albany, with a view toward child welfare reform, it is not difficult to understand the tendency of relationships to be strained between federal and state governments. To manage a nationwide process like the Child and Family Service Reviews and their follow-up, federal officials must apply a consistent approach. While no one would argue that it is impossible for one size to fit all, deviations do not fit well within the context of federal law and regulation. On the other hand, bringing change to a state of 19 million people, 7.3 million of whom live in one metropolitan area, suggests the need for special consideration. It is a tension that probably will not go away.

A second reflection is one that applies to all the states but was voiced with considerable clarity and forcefulness in New York. *Leadership* is the most critical factor in designing and initiating a course of improvement. Child welfare leadership cannot be generic; it needs to be grounded in the values and language of child welfare practice that understands that children thrive best in their own families, state intervention is a course of last resort, and out-of-home placement is not meant to be permanent. In New York, a regional staff person noted her belief that the state would probably succeed in its program improvement plan largely because the leadership in Albany understands and can communicate with the workforce in the counties and the city. Because of that leadership skill, county directors trust Albany to make plans and decisions that support them in doing better work. In short, she described a form of leadership committed to empowering the front line worker, a description in keeping with the Deputy Commissioner's notion of staying attuned to practice as "the most important conversation."

The first concern state administrators raise is the link between strategies and outcomes. New York's strategic approach sets out the comprehensive content of its program improvement agenda and lays out promising processes for the coming years' efforts. The state is also engaged in creative work to define measures and targets for better results for children and families. Both of these major components of program improvement are crucial to success of an outcomes-based reform. The concern has to do with their integration throughout the system, but especially at the level of casework practice, where those strategies that initiate new approaches, such as dual track, differentiated response in protective services and concurrent planning to achieve more timely movement to permanency, need to be constantly complemented by the results that the strategies aim to achieve. The six-month data packages, any-time access to the data warehouse, and county-level definition of targets and progress toward reaching them all support making performance measurement part of the fabric of child welfare services in New York. The concern, again, is that the tools for progress get into the hands of front-line workers, who will be as aware as the policymakers in Albany of the measurable changes they are working to achieve.

The final concern has to do with community involvement. Historically, child welfare has been one of the more insular of the public service systems. Barriers embedded in confidentiality regulations, the demographics of the client population, and the professional status of the workforce have tended to impose a separation of those who serve as the public's agents to protect children and help restore families from the families and communities on whose behalf they work. Only recently has the notion of community partnership begun to take on concrete rather than only rhetorical dimensions.

The operational framework's statement of principles and continuum of services provide the basis for a more robust engagement of community with child welfare. The role of community in defining and achieving the kinds of changes that create new engagement of families and new supports from communities (not just from service providers, but also from neighbors and citizens) is not as clear, however, in the strategies or actions of the plan. Pilots of "parent advisor" programs suggest this kind of involvement at a case level, where some local districts are experimenting with employing peer support from families in the community to supplement professional casework. This concern, however, goes beyond the case level to the program planning, monitoring, quality assurance, and even policy level of program improvement, suggesting the utility of community and family engagement in those processes, as a means of augmenting input, skills, and community understanding of child welfare.

Oklahoma: *Ever-present Expectations*

Some Statistics on Oklahoma's Children and Child Welfare – FFY 2001

- *Estimated number of children under 18: 892,360*
- *Reports of child abuse and neglect: 7.1 per 100 children in population*
- *Substantiated child victims: 1.5 per 100 children in population*
- *Children entering foster care: 6,487*
- *Children leaving foster care: 5,864*
- *Children adopted: 962*

The federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for Oklahoma occurred in March 2002. Oklahoma's Department of Human Services received its final report in June 2002, indicating the need for program improvement on seven outcomes and two systems measures. The state filed its program improvement plan (PIP) two months later and simultaneously submitted a revised Child and Family Services Plan incorporating PIP goals and strategies for improving performance regarding safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes as well as systemic issues. Taking the extra step to change its state child welfare plan to conform to the PIP reflects the deliberate, emphatic focus on the outcomes of the CFSR that characterizes the Oklahoma child welfare system from its Director of Human Services to workers in the counties. Oklahoma's child welfare director described that emphasis as being constantly "in your face"

with an ever-present expectation that everyone connected to child welfare in Oklahoma would be working toward achieving the CFSR outcomes.

Organization and Context

Oklahoma administers child welfare services through its state-level Department of Human Services, governed by a Commission composed of nine appointed commissioners who serve staggered nine-year terms. The Director of Human Services also holds cabinet secretary rank with joint responsibility to the Commission and the Governor. and reports to the Commission rather than directly to the Governor. Within the Department of Human Services, a chief operating officer oversees Family Support Services, Field Operations, and

Children and Family Services Divisions. Components of the Children and Family Services Division include administrative services; protection and permanency services; adoption, research and technology including Oklahoma's Statewide Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), known as KIDS; resources (provider recruitment and support); and continuous quality improvement (including planning, service evaluation, staff and provider training and policy). Administration of child welfare services, as well as other components of family services such as family income assistance, is the responsibility of the Field Operations Division.

Field staff for child welfare services are dispersed in six area offices that divide up the state's counties. Up to 23 county offices report to each area director. In the case of the most populous county, Oklahoma County, there are sub-county offices reporting to the county director. Child welfare staff at the state level point out that this separation of state leadership and responsibility for child welfare policy, quality assurance, grants and contract management, and data from field operations responsible for direct services poses no significant problems. They attribute good working relations to strong management and support from the chief operating officer for the Human Services Centers to whom both Children and Family Services and Field Operations Divisions report.

Oklahoma developed the first federally accredited SACWIS in the nation and has been widely touted in national child welfare circles as a pioneer in its use of data to manage its system. Especially important for its follow-up to the CFSR are the units at the state level charged with continuous quality improvement monitoring (the CQI unit) and data management through the system.

A unique feature of Oklahoma's experience with CFSR was its decision to begin using the federal CFSR protocol to monitor all of its counties more than a year before its own scheduled federal review. In January 2001, the state CQI unit, in partnership with field operations, initiated a year-long schedule to monitor all 77 counties. In effect, the state undertook the baseline functions of a PIP in advance of the federal process.¹⁰ When the CFSR did occur, staff at the state level and in the three counties chosen, for intensive case sampling by federal reviewers, were not surprised by its findings, since they had already identified those areas

¹⁰ During the site visit for this report, CQI staff completed findings from the August review of one of the sub-county offices within Oklahoma County. The report documented improvements over the first review carried out in 2001. Specifically, it noted 100 percent accomplishment of the elements that measure outcomes for in-home safety, permanency and stability of placements, continuity of family relationships for children in care, and receipt of appropriate educational services. It highlighted areas for continued attention, including timeliness of investigations, regular visits with parents of children in care, and receipt of initial health screenings.

needing improvement. The PIP filed by the state in late summer 2002 did not inaugurate a new system of program improvement and monitoring but rather affirmed one that was already ongoing.

Oklahoma's Program Improvement Plan Goals

The federal CFSR found Oklahoma fully conforming to systemic factors addressing statewide information systems, quality assurance, staff and provider training, community responsiveness, and foster care licensing, recruitment, and retention. The two systemic elements found to need improvement were case reviews and a sufficient array of available services for children and families. The table below outlines outcome findings, the state's PIP targets to address them, and the source of data to track progress.

Oklahoma's Program Improvement				
CFSR Indicator	Subject	Federal Review	Goal-January 2005	Method of Measurement
<i>S1.1</i>	<i>Timeliness of investigations</i>	<i>71%</i>	<i>73%</i>	<i>KIDS</i>
<i>S1.2</i>	<i>Repeat maltreatment</i>	<i>9.8%</i>	<i>9%</i>	<i>KIDS</i>
<i>S1.3</i>	<i>Maltreatment in foster care</i>	<i>1.4%</i>	<i>1%</i>	<i>KIDS</i>
<i>S2.1</i>	<i>Timely response to referral for in-home services</i>	<i>88%</i>	<i>89%</i>	<i>Provider reports</i>
<i>S2.2</i>	<i>Risk assessments for children remaining in own homes</i>	<i>82%</i>	<i>83%</i>	<i>State CFSRs</i>
<i>S2.3</i>	<i>Risk assessments for all children served</i>	<i>82%</i>	<i>83%</i>	<i>State CFSRs</i>
<i>P1.1</i>	<i>Reentry to foster care for children reunified within past 12 months</i>	<i>13.5%</i>	<i>12%</i>	<i>KIDS</i>
<i>P1.2</i>	<i>No more than 2 placements for children in care for 12 months or less</i>	<i>73.8%</i>	<i>78%</i>	<i>KIDS</i>
<i>P1.3</i>	<i>TPR filed by end of 15th month of any 22 month interval of foster care</i>	<i>80%</i>	<i>82%</i>	<i>KIDS</i>
<i>P1.4</i>	<i>Reunification within 12 months</i>	<i>78.6%</i>	<i>82%</i>	<i>KIDS</i>
<i>P1.5</i>	<i>Finalized adoption within 24 months of latest removal</i>	<i>25.5%</i>	<i>27%</i>	<i>KIDS</i>

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Oklahoma's Program Improvement				
CFSR Indicator	Subject	Federal Review	Goal-January 2005	Method of Measurement
P2.1	Placement in close proximity to parents	94%	94%	State CFRs
P2.2	Placement with siblings	95%	95%	State CFRs
P2.3	Visits with mothers	90%	92%	State CFRs
P2.4	Visits with fathers	24%	30%	State CFRs
P2.5	Visits with siblings	NA	75%	State CFRs
P2.6	Preservation of connections with relatives, friends, and cultural practices	83%	85%	State CFRs
P2.7	Consideration of reunification with noncustodial parent	NA	35%	State CFRs
P2.8	Consideration of reunification with maternal relatives	72%	77%	State CFRs
P2.9	Consideration of reunification with paternal relatives	NA	35%	State CFRs
WB1.1	Needs assessed, identified and addressed for children and families	78%	80%	State CFRs
WB1.2	Children and families actively involved in case planning	60%	70%	State CFRs
WB1.3	Worker visits with children focused on case planning, safety and well-being	82%	84%	State CFRs
WB1.4	Worker visits with mothers focused on case planning, safety and well-being	78%	80%	State CFRs
WB1.5	Worker visits with fathers focused on case planning, safety, and well-being	NA	30%	State CFRs
WB2.1	Educational needs addressed	81%	84%	State CFRs
WB3.1	Physical health needs assessed and addressed	77%	79%	State CFRs
WB3.2	Mental health needs assessed and addressed	74%	76%	State CFRs

Because the state has chosen to adopt the CFSR protocol for its state qualitative review system and for measuring progress in achieving many of its PIP targets, it also chose to address all of the performance elements of the CFSR, including the ones that met federal standards. Yet, leadership has set priorities. The Director of Human Services has requested regular and frequent reports on identified length of stay in foster care as a first-order business item. Through attention already given to this outcome, the state agency has reduced the average length of foster care stays from 36 to 24 months.

The state is making an aggressive commitment to increase the involvement of fathers in the child welfare system. Setting modest goals for itself - without baseline data to assist in judging their viability - the state agency hopes to increase caseworker attention to possibilities of in-home placements and reunification with fathers as well as kinship placements with paternal relatives, as a means of expanding available resources to achieve safety and permanency for children who come into the system. It is anticipated that this will have a significant positive effect on outcome realization in many domains.

In addition to the outcomes-related performance measures included in the previous table and the general system improvements, Oklahoma has also highlighted its intention to improve the state's role in child welfare services for the 39 American Indian tribes located within the state's borders. All aspects of the system, from receipt of reports of suspected maltreatment through issues related to termination of parental rights and adoption require careful communication between the state agency and tribal officials, under the provisions of the Indian Child Welfare Act. With great variations in cultures and organizational capacities among the tribes, those communications pose major challenges to the state.

The Process of Improvement

Oklahoma has put in place adequate staffing of their internal efforts to continue to focus on DFSR outcomes. Each of the six CQI staff assigned to the CFSR process provides direct support to one of the six areas and participates in ongoing reviews of the other five.

County reviews begin two months before the on-site stage with identification of sample cases. The random sample for each county ultimately includes at least four permanency cases, one preventive service case, and six cases reviewed primarily for timeliness and appropriateness of responses to reports of suspected child maltreatment. The first five of these entail a full array of interviews of all

relevant participants in each case. Replicating the federal procedure, county staff contact families to solicit their cooperation in participating in each review. To date, it is significant that the small sample appears to comport well both with county caseworkers' and supervisors' experiences of their caseloads, as well as findings from the federal CFSR.

In addition, as in the case of the federal CFSRs, reviewers interview stakeholders with specific attention to the systems issues. Stakeholders include judges, district attorneys, service providers, Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), mental health, health and education professionals, and law enforcement officials. On-site reviews last three to four days each, with immediate feedback provided to county directors and staff at the conclusion.

Oklahoma's CQI unit has equipped reviewers with new technology assistance to capture their case review ratings and their assessments from stakeholder interviews. As ratings for each performance measure are entered into a computer-based program, the program automatically generates findings for each case and then rolls up the score for each measure and for the overall outcome. The review team provides a hard-copy report of on CFSR outcomes. Each of the six CQI staff assigned to the CFSR process findings to the county as well as area director at the conclusion of the review.

In response to review findings, each county program improvement plan must include at least three outcomes found not to conform to standards as priorities. The state CQI team immediately informs each county of the results of its review and explains any findings about which there may be questions; but they do not prescribe requirements or even give advice on what steps to take to make improvements. As one CQI staff person put it, "all quality improvement, like all politics, is local." The state team sees itself in a support role. In the final analysis, "improvement has to take place one case at a time."

The other component with significant potential for Oklahoma's program improvement efforts is KIDS - Oklahoma's SACWIS. Leaders and staff responsible for KIDS are the first to note that they have not yet achieved perfection in making KIDS a user-friendly tool for managers, supervisors, and caseworkers. Some caseworkers and some supervisors think that data input requires too much of their time and effort without adequate repayment in new efficiencies or improved practice. Some complain that the computer becomes their most demanding client. Still others have experienced the result of a

functional SACWIS as an instrument of punishment rather than help (numbers may be used to “beat up on” caseworkers).

In spite of these on-going challenges, there is universal agreement that Oklahoma’s child welfare system could not function without KIDS. The system is intricately woven into all elements of service provision. It was instrumental in helping the state identify and resolve a backlog of over 3,000 child abuse and neglect investigations which, with targeted attention, has been reduced to about 300. Because of its comprehensiveness, KIDS gives state leaders a sense of confidence that they know the facts about the children for whom they have responsibility, where they are located, what is being done for them and, to some extent, how they are faring in terms of safety, permanence, and well-being. As one staff person put it, the soundness of KIDS demands honesty from Oklahoma’s child welfare managers. There is no room for the benefit of the doubt; they must face the facts.

Despite early federal certification as a fully functional management information system for child welfare services, KIDS has not stood still. In response to the statewide commitment to quality improvement, some of its system enhancements are drawing closer to completion and others are on the drawing boards. The Research and Technology unit has collaborated with the University of Kansas School of Social Work to design web-based outcome reports using KIDS-generated data to “drill down” from aggregated statewide or area-wide numbers through county and supervisory unit levels to individual caseworkers cases. Additional reports, designed and developed by the KIDS staff, providing numbers such as basic caseloads, the children who have come into the system but still lack a case plan, child and family visits, services provided, court decisions, and permanency plans will be immediately accessible within a point and click web environment.

KIDS staff are currently designing a web-based system that will give managers at county, area, and state levels a regularly updated brief report on performance and resources. Called the “Dashboard,” this brief at-a-glance report will include eight measures that match CFSR outcomes and can quickly point the user’s attention to significant changes, slippages, and anomalies in performance to achieve PIP targets.

Continuing Concerns and Issues

In keeping with the “ever-present expectation” emphasis in Oklahoma, a primary concern is the need to make the outcomes and related performance measures of the PIP and the revised Child and Family Service plan the working agenda of all of the system’s workforce, especially including its caseworkers. Discussions with staff who coordinated the federal CFSR for Oklahoma County and participated in preparation of the PIP made clear the actionable implications of this concern. As the staff observed, improving practice is the bottom line. That requires getting “buy-in” to an outcomes-focused agenda. Everyone must be aware of what is expected. To achieve this universal level of awareness among child welfare workers in Oklahoma County, CQI, other central office, and county-level staff are training front-line workers to understand the CFSR review instrument that the state is using in its annual county reviews. This same instrument is being used in a case review process conducted by supervisors and peers. Each county’s program improvement plan will address the three most significant areas of need identified by state and, in the future, local reviews.

A second and related issue is staff recruitment and retention. Half of Oklahoma’s child welfare staff has less than two years experience. The state is field-testing retention initiatives such as home officing to determine if this can have a positive impact on both longevity and performance. In addition, state CQI staff are convinced that the focus on outcomes and the attention to worker success and strengths will result in improved retention of good workers. Together with very concrete training experiences that focus on desired outcomes for children, the use of regular feedback through daily, weekly, and quarterly updates from KIDS and qualitative assessments through case reviews can buttress and reward good practice. The bottom line is to improve practice.

A third concern for Oklahoma is a broad-scale adoption of its piloted Individual Service Plans (ISPs) for permanency planning. Family involvement in development of ISPs is a key ingredient and, as noted above, father participation is taking on a new significance to enhance the quality of plans. In Oklahoma County, juvenile judges have endorsed the importance of ISPs and have volunteered to be part of the pilot.

Finally, Oklahoma continues to share with colleagues in other states the challenge of integrating its acclaimed SACWIS/KIDS (with its increasingly outcomes-oriented quantitative data) and its statewide, annual qualitative case review process to produce a seamless, mutually reinforcing quality improvement system.

Core training of all staff on both elements that are vitally important to the PIP, together with technologic enhancements of KIDS, increase the chance that these two major tools of program improvement will converge where they matter most - in the hands of caseworkers and their supervisors responsible for the lives of Oklahoma children.

Oregon: Change within Change

Some Statistics on Oregon's Children and Child Welfare - 2001

- *Estimated number of children under 18: 859,208*
- *Reports of child abuse or neglect: 36,303 (4.2 percent)*
- *Substantiated child victims: 8,232 (9,011 counting duplicate reports) (.95 percent)*
- *Children entering foster care: 4,522*
- *Children leaving foster care: 4,676*
- *Children adopted: 1,071*

The Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) hosted its federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) in June 2001. The CFSR report identified twelve program measures and four systems measures that required program improvement plan attention. As an early state to experience the CFSR under a relatively new director of its Division of Services to Children and Families, Oregon's child welfare management staff expressed no surprise in learning of the need for program improvement. Indeed, they appear to have reflected a new spirit from the outset. As one observer described it, the new director had set out to change the culture from one of "we can't do that" to "we are going to try because it's our job."

A Changing Context

The months that followed the Oregon CFSR saw the same kinds of delays caused by inconsistencies of statewide data with case review findings, federal completion of the final report, and other problems that virtually all of the first 17 states experienced. On July 1, 2002, the Oregon DHS submitted its final program improvement plan, representing a commitment to make positive changes in Oregon's child welfare system. Meanwhile, other changes with significant relevance to Oregon's system and its capacity to undertake a challenging program improvement plan had occurred. During those 13 months, two changes in Oregon's political and organizational environment were especially noteworthy. First, like many states in 2002, Oregon's state financial deficit moved relentlessly toward a crisis of major proportions. Second, the state's executive branch decided to reorganize the Department of Human Services, creating a division for Children, Adults and Families and a separate

field division for Community Human Services. The Division of Services to Children and Families, which previously had line authority from the central office in Salem to the district and branch offices for child protection, permanency, and adoption services, was changed to reflect the new Children, Adults and Families division in Salem. The new division is the policy office with a separate field structure that melds income maintenance, aging, disabilities, and other services together with child welfare, all reporting to Community Human Services at the central office level.

In this context, DHS submitted its final program improvement plan. The plan focused on goals it intended to achieve over the coming two years. To produce the plan, the state policy office, the Children, Adults and Families division, led an inclusive process of goal-setting, involving many of the stakeholders who had been participants in the CFSR. One staff person noted that the process was rich in ideas and, if all of the ideas had been incorporated in the final plan, carrying it out would have taken ten years. An important part of the planning process was not only the breadth of participation but also the realism to choose targets and accompanying action steps that could be accomplished in the given timeframe.

Oregon's Program Improvement Plan Goals

Oregon's plan addressed each of the state's child welfare system areas that reviewers found not to be in substantial compliance. The table on the next page lays out the complete set of outcomes-oriented performance measures, the CFSR finding of the level of compliance among the sample cases reviewed, and the targets/goals that Oregon set for itself.

Two points are especially noteworthy about Oregon's approach to program improvement planning. First, with respect to adoption goals, Oregon has deviated from the expected approach of setting a percentage target for improvement based on the federal standard. Instead, Oregon has proposed substitute goals that they believe is an improved measure. "A substitute goal is proposed for Adoption, where Oregon will reduce the median length of time to achieve a final adoption from the 2001 level of 43 months to 36 months by March 2004." Staff explained that achieving a percentage improvement in children adopted within the prescribed 24-month period from a child's initial placement was imminently feasible, but it would almost certainly lead to the

State of Oregon Program Improvement Plan Goals¹¹				
CFSR Indicator	Subject	Federal Review	Goal	Method of Measurement
1	<i>Timeliness of investigations</i>	67%	100%	<i>Statewide data system</i>
4	<i>Risk of harm to child</i>	80%	85%	<i>On-site case review</i>
7	<i>Permanency goal for child</i>	62%	75%	<i>On-site case review</i>
8	<i>Independent living services</i>	75%	80%	<i>On-site case review</i>
9	<i>Adoption</i>	75%	*	<i>Statewide data system</i>
10	<i>Permanency goal or other planned permanent living arrangement</i>	85%	90%	<i>On-site case review</i>
17	<i>Needs and services of child, parents and foster parents</i>	68%	80%	<i>On-site case review</i>
19	<i>Worker visits with child</i>	65%	100%	<i>Statewide data system</i>
20	<i>Worker visits with parents</i>	75%	100%	<i>Statewide data system</i>
21	<i>Educational needs of child</i>	82%	90%	<i>On-site case review</i>
23	<i>Mental health of child</i>	88%	90%	<i>On-site case review</i>

unacceptable practice of “creaming” the easiest adoption cases for quick action, while leaving the harder-to-place children still waiting for permanent homes. A decision to seek a change in the median time to adoption for the entire caseload represented to them a commitment to “good practice.”

Second, Oregon child welfare leaders chose deliberately to emphasize, through their goal-setting, the most crucial changes that they thought needed to occur in the coming two years. In keeping with that emphasis, they did not shrink from setting demanding challenges: 100 percent of all cases must meet the state’s standard that reports of child maltreatment be investigated within a 24-hour period; and 100 percent of all cases must meet the state’s standard for monthly face-to-face visits of case workers with both children and their parents.

¹¹ This chart is taken from the letter from the Department of Human Services, consigned by Ramona Foley (Assistant Director for Children, Adults and Families), William T. Fink (Assistant Director for Community Human Services) and Bobby S. Mink (Director), to Steve Henigson, Region X Administrator of the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, July 1, 2002.

In addition to the outcomes-related performance measures, Oregon’s performance improvement plan lays out changes that the state intends to achieve in its systems and processes. Although the CFSR did not find Oregon out of compliance on its statewide information system, the plan emphasizes the critical aspect of a well-functioning data system by including the following targets:

- “Develop a culture that values data and recognizes the data’s importance in the child welfare program,” and
- “Fully support outcomes-based practice for permanency of children.”

Other process measures that the plan addresses include:

- Written case plans;
- Court reporting to ensure timely and appropriate judicial oversight of permanency plans;
- Continuous reexamination of the appropriateness of permanency plans;
- Training new workers prior to undertaking caseloads;
- Supervisory training that focuses on clinical supervision, management and use of data as a management tool;
- Core training that includes skill-based experiences; and
- Ongoing training related to areas of improvement in the program improvement plan.

The Process of Improvement

Several important changes immediately became the new standard operating procedure for Oregon’s child welfare system as a result of the CFSR, even before the program improvement plan received final federal approval. First, internal data reports that had been distributed semi-annually are now distributed on a quarterly basis. While supervisors could use data reports earlier to track their units’ work, the new plan calls for more emphasis on regular use of data, especially for purposes of managing staff and workload. As a manager of the field structure in the Portland area noted, child welfare staff have tended to be saddled with onerous data entry and documentation-intensive tasks, all too often keeping them from their direct work with children and families. That fact, coupled with unavoidable “down time” waiting at the curb for police assistance on investigations or waiting outside court rooms for dockets to be called, has affected the efficiency of an already caseload-heavy system. A difference that the post-CFSR plan seeks to implement is a focus on fewer measures with greater

attention to their link to real outcomes for families. Pre-CFSR, there was no dearth of data, but the data were not used for the kinds of planning that most affected child welfare at the practice level.

Second, Oregon - like other states - has adopted its own version of the CFSR process to monitor and track progress. Previously, quality assurance meant a sample file-based review at local levels. This process had the benefit of including every district and branch office over a three-year review cycle but did not specifically focus on child and family outcomes. The new system calls for more extensive reviews, including face-to-face interviews with children, parents, foster parents and service providers, of a sample of cases in three districts or branches in the state on a semiannual basis. One drawback is that resources do not allow for a 100-percent coverage of the state in a three-year period.

To manage these reviews, the Children, Adults and Families unit in Salem has reconstructed its quality assurance staff, after losing four of its five members, into the one-person “team” who organizes and manages the new review system. Semi-annual reviews will always include a site in Multnomah County (metropolitan Portland area). Field office managers and supervisors from other areas of the state, as well as staff from Children, Adults and Families in Salem and the juvenile court system, comprise review teams.

The first three reviews occurred in March 2002. From that experience, staff learned that two weeks is insufficient, given workload issues, and subsequent reviews will be spread over a four-week period. In a procedure slightly different from the federal reviews, state staff prepare reports on the reviewed sites and “deliver” them personally, first to management staff and then to all the workers.

A synopsis of Oregon’s internal March 2002 Child and Family Service Review shows both its reliance on a quantified performance measurement system and its use of the data generated from the review to identify issues that require special attention. For example, in reviewing the timeliness of investigations in the three service delivery areas, reviewers identified “courtesy supervision” - cases involving a child residing in a county other than the one where the child’s case originated and where his/her case worker resided - as an issue requiring clearer policy. In addition, coordination in cases involving removal of a child from home by police was identified as an issue affecting timeliness of face-to-face contact with child protective service workers. For each area “needing improvement,” the March 2002 report probed reasons amenable to policy

or practice changes. Similarly, the report went beyond rating “strengths” to identifying best practices and systems that appeared to support the improvements that reviewers found.¹²

Issues and Challenges

Some of the problems encountered by Oregon as it pursues program improvement may suggest areas for further refinement of the federal accountability system. One that was particularly compelling, especially in a context of shrinking state general funds, is the critical role of the judicial system. As one of the Oregon “stakeholders” said, “It makes no sense to penalize the child welfare system for what courts can or can’t accomplish with no funding.”¹³ The federal court-improvement program, administered by the Children’s Bureau, is the only source of federal funding for the courts, and it amounts to only \$135,000 a year. In comparison, the state receives \$800,000 per year to administer the activities of the foster care citizen review board. While useful for addressing specific system changes in court-child welfare issues, court-improvement program funding is not sufficient to help the court system keep up with the intensified role required of it by the expedited permanency planning that is at the base of program improvement activities. In Oregon, as elsewhere, the juvenile court system depends on state funds. With the budget crisis, courts in some of the areas needing the most support for child welfare reform are contemplating reductions in court days to four per week. On the positive side, Oregon’s presiding judge continues to underscore the importance of juvenile and child and family court activities.

A second concern relates to the use of Oregon’s semi-annual Child and Family Service Reviews as the principal vehicle for tracking program improvement. Stakeholders generally lauded Children, Adults and Families leadership for its collaboration with advocates, other agencies, and stakeholders in general, as exemplified by their participation in both the federal CFSR and program improvement planning. But that level of involvement does not appear to be carrying through to the reviews that the department is using to implement the program improvement plan. Again, resources may be the biggest obstacle, especially with a process that is purposefully intense and requiring levels of expertise sufficient to understand the practice issues that characterize sample

¹² Oregon Department of Human Services, *Community Human Services and Children Adult and Families, Program Performance and Reporting, “Child and Family Service Review - Oregon State Internal Review - March 2002.”*

¹³ Interview with Nancy Miller, Director of Juvenile Court Programs, August 12, 2002.

cases. On the positive side, field and policy staff mentioned the positive effects of having non-child welfare department managers and supervisors as reviewers, especially in light of the organizational merger at the district and branch level requiring staff unfamiliar with child welfare to take on management responsibility for child welfare workers and their caseloads. Everyone agreed that the review experience gave reviewers from income maintenance and other human services new appreciation for the complexities of child protection and permanency situations.

A third area of possible challenge involves relationship with the broader community, especially through the press. Oregon set a high bar for other states to emulate when the Assistant Director for Children, Adults and Families shared the findings of the federal CFSR with the press, with a positive message of what the state was already doing and intended to do to make its services better. The press, however, has not continued to track state implementation, and the agency has not defined a strategy of continuing press engagement. As one staff person put it, “no news is good news.” While that sentiment certainly defines the usual state of affairs for child welfare across the country, there is news - positive and negative - to be shared with Oregon’s citizens about what their child welfare agency is attempting to achieve. When bad news occurs, as can be predicted in any child welfare context, its destructive consequences can be contained if citizens have learned through their news media that the department has been seriously engaged on their behalf to make improvements for children and families in the child protection system.

A fourth area of concern relates to the data. This issue has principal relevance to federal policy and practice. The field understands that the CFSR process is evolutionary and that refinements are being made as experiences dictate their necessity. On the other hand, lack of definitional clarity leading to inaccurate data entry and subsequent bad aggregated statewide data, coupled with significant, late-breaking changes in definitions, have had a disruptive effect on Oregon’s program improvement work. Staff at both the central office policy level and in the field spoke specifically about the definition of exit from foster care. Oregon’s earlier interpretation of “exit from foster care” led it to count children literally leaving a foster care placement to return home. Using that number, Oregon exceeded the federal standard, and its data became a factor in setting the 75th percentile standard at the level being used nationally to determine states’ conformity. When federal guidance clarified the definition, however, Oregon had to recompute time in care to extend either six months beyond the point when a child actually leaves the foster placement or when the court

declares the placement ended, whichever occurs first. This change increased the average length of foster care placement and put Oregon below the 75th percentile standard. This definitional issue proved to be highly distracting to many in the system, as well as labor-intensive for the research staff and the Children's Bureau to recompute already submitted AFCARS data. The distraction suggests the need for greater clarity at the outset. Oregon's concern about this issue, however, underscores the very basic role that data now play in child welfare reform.

Finally, the economic context for Oregon's program improvement efforts rises to the level of the greatest concern and challenge facing the state's child welfare system. Reform that demands, as Oregon's program improvement plan does, intensive and ongoing staff training, new levels of attention to data entry and data analysis, and greater efforts at collaboration with other human service systems will add costs to reform efforts. Added to the challenge, state policymakers are faced almost simultaneously with concurrent reform movements. The education system, the public assistance/welfare system, and the health care system - all are in similar kinds of reform-related ferment, and all are in need of similar levels of enhanced support from state government. Given concerns of state legislators and a new governor elected in 2002, there is an open question whether Oregon's child welfare leadership can maintain the kind of interagency collaboration that children and families depend on, or if the competition for attention and funding by each system pursuing its own reform commitments will derail these efforts. Both staff and stakeholders committed to changing Oregon's child welfare system for the better are determined to use an outcomes-oriented performance system to steer a course that keeps interagency alliances in tact and uses multiple resources with efficiency.

Vermont:

Four Themes for Improvement

Some Statistics on Vermont's Children and Child Welfare – 2001

- *Estimated number of children under 18: 147,523*
- *Reports of child abuse and neglect: 2 per 100 children in population*
- *Substantiated child victims: .7 per 100 children in population*
- *Children entering foster care: 818*
- *Children leaving foster care: 760*
- *Children adopted: 111*

Vermont's Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services (SRS) hosted the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) in April/May 2001.

Prior to the on-site review, Vermont used the statewide assessment as the virtual beginning of its program improvement planning process. Recognizing that the state was certain to be found "not in substantial conformity" in the statewide assessment and the on-site review, the state predicted a number of the most salient issues including, most importantly, stability of foster care placements. During the statewide assessment, the child welfare agency organized local focus groups to provide input on this major issue, adding content and relevance to the assessment. In addition, agency officials decided to make the whole CFSR process serve Vermont's purposes. They used the statewide assessment to

design an advocacy message informing both the state legislature and the public about the needs for greater support for child welfare in Vermont.

The final report of Vermont's CFSR concluded that the state was not in substantial conformity with national standards on six of the seven outcomes, the exception being the well-being outcome on provision of appropriate educational services for children in care. Other strengths included the agency's effectiveness in addressing risk of harm to children, keeping children from re-entering foster care, maintaining relationships of children in out-of-home placements with parents and siblings, and involving family members in case planning. Reviewers determined that Vermont met standards for five of the seven systemic factors, finding that Vermont needs to improve in the areas of quality assurance and licensing, recruitment, and retention of foster and adoptive parents.

Vermont first filed its Program Improvement Plan (PIP) in September 2001. The PIP was pending approval in November 2001 when the Children's Bureau held a meeting to review the first 17 states' CFSRs. Following the meeting, the Bureau invited Vermont and the two other states that had already submitted PIPs to reevaluate their submissions in order to ensure that their goals and strategies were achievable in the two-year period. Vermont subsequently submitted a revised PIP in February 2002. State staff used the time between November and February to explore reasonable and fair ways to measure progress toward goals, given that federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis (AFCARS) and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) data are submitted too long "after the fact" to be used to evaluate ongoing progress.

As one of the first states to undergo the CFSR, Vermont crafted its PIP without the benefit of the format that the Children's Bureau published later. Vermont chose to frame improvement plans within four general themes: quality assurance; foster and adoptive parent recruitment, retention, and support; assessment/documentation; and permanency planning and placement stability. The arrangement of goals and strategies within these broad thematic areas allows Vermont to think globally about the underpinnings of practice and what is most likely to have a positive impact on safety, permanence, and well-being.

Organization and Context

Vermont's Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services is part of the Agency of Human Services. SRS delivers child protection and child welfare services through a state-administered system, with 12 district offices. Its three service divisions manage disability determination, child care, and social services. The Social Services Division's responsibilities include: child protection; foster care, permanency planning and adoption services for children in custody; juvenile justice; and residential licensing of foster and kinship homes, group residential facilities, and child-placing agencies. A particular characteristic of the Vermont system is the organizational integration of child welfare and juvenile justice services, even to the extent that SRS social workers carry both types of cases.

The SRS mission statement is, "We are committed to protect children and strengthen families, in partnership with families and communities." A set of guiding principles buttresses the mission statement with these practice-focused commitments:

- We will carry out our responsibility to serve the best interests of children who are abused, neglected, delinquent or beyond the control of their parents.
- Children deserve to be safe and secure.
- Children belong in families who are committed to them into adulthood.
- We will focus our services on the child in his or her family, culture and community.
- We will involve individuals we serve in the planning and evaluation of services.
- We will collaborate with communities to create public policy and services to support children and their families.
- We will deliver services within the available budgets.
- Our decisions, policies and internal organization will support and reflect our mission.¹⁴

Outcomes and indicators of the services that SRS has committed to provide mirror the outcomes and indicators of CFSR and the nationally accepted framework of safety, permanence, and well-being.

As a relatively small state, Vermont's public child welfare services are the responsibility of 130 social workers serving in the six districts. Most staff carry generic caseloads, although specialists conduct child protective investigations. Six staff serve as statewide adoption specialists. The local district offices manage intake, including child abuse and neglect investigations, with a statewide after-hours emergency service as back-up.

In 1996, as a result of mandatory cuts in state positions, SRS eliminated its office charged with quality assurance, thus leading to the finding by the CFSR of nonconformity with that systemic factor. The state authorized hiring two quality assurance staff in 2001.

Vermont's child welfare system is blessed with a strong early childhood education/child care array of services, which has led to a unique practice in handling in-home cases. In other states, these cases would require ongoing supervision of in-home child protection services for young children. In Vermont, when it is not necessary to take custody of preschool-age children, caseworkers most frequently refer families to early childhood or family support agencies and

¹⁴ Vermont Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services, "Statewide Assessment for Child and Family Services Review 2000-2001, February 2001, p. 2.

close their cases. Together with the agency's custody responsibility for older children in the juvenile justice system and its legal responsibility to investigate and protect in cases of sexual abuse involving nonfamilial, as well as familial, perpetrators, the resulting lower numbers of preschool children in protective care contribute to an average age of children served by the department of 14.3 years.

Vermont's Program Improvement Plan

Vermont's PIP, with its early beginnings in the statewide assessment process, combines findings into four broad themes for improvement.

Quality Assurance - This theme encompasses several areas of focus, including statute and policy compliance, quality of services, social worker contact with families and children, title IV-E compliance, consumer input, outcome reports, alignment of quality assurance procedures with the CFSR process, and monitoring of the PIP.

Foster and Adoptive Parent Recruitment - This theme specifically addresses cross-jurisdictional placements of children and recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive homes.

Assessment/Documentation - Vermont is adopting "structured decision-making" as its standard approach to address the need to ensure thorough and more accurate child and family assessments, ongoing case assessment, and appropriate case documentation.

Permanency Planning/Placement Stability - This theme targets problems with delays in court action and issues of continuum of placements or services and supports for foster parents and other placements.

As of October 2002, Vermont was well on its way in implementing its PIP. While relying on regular review of data generated by its management information system, SRS staff will soon be tracking progress through case reviews using a new quality assurance system, with a plan for six CFSR-type reviews of district offices each year, allowing for complete state coverage on a biennial basis. On-site reviews will assess the status of 10 cases each, with personal interviews of child and family members, staff, foster and/or adoptive parents, and other service providers.

One feature of the state's improvement efforts - its communication strategy - deserves special mention. *PIP Points* is a series of colorful, one-page fact-sheets that the central office Quality Assurance staff disseminate periodically to SRS staff, managers, and stakeholders statewide. Examples of the subjects contained

in already published *PIP Points* include a description of the overall CFSR process, a summary of Vermont's PIP, information about the new quality assurance system that will monitor progress in achieving PIP improvements, and a first PIP progress report. The last edition indicated that the quarterly report to the federal regional office documented success in meeting targets for reducing repeat maltreatment, reducing the number of children making more than two moves in out-of-home placements in a 12-month period, and reducing the median time from entry into care to adoption. It also noted that the state had not yet achieved complete success in meeting the goal to reduce reentry into foster care.¹⁵

The Social Services Division's policy and planning staff note their emphasis on the role of structured assessment and decision-making in moving toward achievement of improvements. The state has contracted with the Children's Research Center of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency to provide assistance in developing its own tailored set of assessment tools. One of the findings from the CFSR was lack of sufficient evidence that social workers were carrying out initial and ongoing assessments to determine the appropriateness of child placements and the direction of permanency plans. The tools being developed by committees of SRS staff address intake and investigation, ongoing social work, and level of care in out-of-home placements.¹⁶ They will serve the dual purpose of providing greater consistency in decision-making and assuring appropriate record-keeping on each case.

A final highlight of Vermont's PIP is its attention to improvement of the agency's interface with the state's family courts. The introduction of structured decision-making for agency staff will be shared with judges and court personnel in order to provide both systems with a common framework. Working with court administrators, the Administrative Judge, and the state's Court Improvement Project manager, SRS staff are focusing specifically on data sharing, training, piloting a new case management protocol, reducing the backlog in petitions to terminate parental rights, and developing more useful feedback mechanisms between courts and the agency.

¹⁵ SRS-Social Services, *PIP Points*, (No. 4, September 2002).

¹⁶ SRS-Social Services, *Program Improvement Request for Volunteers: Structured Assessment and Decision-Making Tools* (February 2002).

Concerns and Challenges

Vermont state-level officials have several concerns as they pursue PIP changes in child welfare. One issue, the timeliness of data, affects all states equally and raises significant issues for federal management of the CFSR and PIP process. As Vermont staff pointed out, the data on which the statewide assessment depended were already two years old at the time when they were used as a baseline for the CFSR. Likewise, data used as baselines against which to assess targets in the PIP are not current. The data available for judging success or failure of the PIP in 2003/2004 will describe the cases that the agency is managing in early 2002, not those later cases that will show the effectiveness of innovations, such as structured assessment and decision-making. The state can access more current data through its state data system, but these are not the numbers that federal staff use to make their determinations of success or failure.

In order to address this problem, Vermont is measuring progress toward PIP goals using a quarterly report called *Outcomes at a Glance*. This report presents information on a quarterly basis, relying on the same logic used to generate CFSR data profiles. *Outcomes at a Glance* presents statewide and district-level data in Excel pivot tables and charts, with “drill-down” to case-level data contained on other worksheets in the same notebook. State agency staff report that this use of recently generated data encourages districts to make the link between data and practice through examination of district trends and by looking at actual cases contributing to the trends. Vermont faces some challenges due to its small incidence of certain case types. A difference of one case can make a district meet or fail to meet an outcome standard for achievement.

Vermont also expresses concern about the state of current knowledge about what changes can be expected to produce results. Although policy and planning staff are positive about the state’s adoption of the structured decision-making approach, they are not certain that strategies that they have chosen will lead to objectively measured improvements. Although each benchmark may be met and each task completed, outcomes may still not move in the right direction. In effect, Vermont sees its PIP implementation as an exploratory venture rather than a pathway to certain success.

A third concern reflects an issue heard from other states: the comparability of measurements against a national standard. This problem is particularly vexing to Vermont because, by law, SRS serves a combined child protection, child welfare, and juvenile justice population, and the average age of children in its care is 14.3 years. Other states also have unique populations and unique service mandates. A single national standard in each of six areas, without reference to the age or other variables characterizing the child population whom a particular state agency serve, may provide a misleading benchmark against which to measure real progress.

Two broader contextual concerns loom as challenges for Vermont's program improvement success. First, Vermont is one of the many states that in 2002-2003 face a severe budget shortfall. Like their child welfare colleagues across the country, SRS staff will be attempting to maintain momentum in the face of budget constraints, with particular concern about their ability to retain a sufficient workforce to do its work.

Second, retention of foster parents, especially ones able to provide homes for an increasing number of children with special behavioral and mental health needs, poses a special challenge in a state in which most foster families have both parents working outside the home. Placement stability and time to reunification both are affected by this problem. The state is making special efforts to determine whether recruitment and retention should be relegated to a contractor to provide more concentrated foster family recruitment and support services, especially for its target group of 6 to 11 year old children.

Appendix B:

Federal Legislation and Executive Actions¹⁷

Introduction

The Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) system and Program Improvement Plans (PIPs) respond to almost a decade-long process involving congressional legislative action, executive regulatory changes, and program development. The following section provides a brief overview of that background for states' current efforts in pursuit of child welfare services reform.

Legislative Changes

The mid-1990s saw unprecedented legislative action related to child welfare that has the potential for significantly changing and improving child welfare systems. These legislative changes refocused attention from process to outcomes and performance. To better understand the basis for expectations of improved performance in public child welfare, it will be useful to summarize the legislative changes, each in turn, and then examine the federal and state responses to a new way of managing child welfare services.

1993 Government Performance and Results Act

The initial legislation that began the broad effort to examine the outcomes of government programs was the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) of 1993. This act required that federal agencies identify quantifiable goals and outcomes for measuring the results of federal programs, with the expectation that future funding would be linked to whether or not federal agencies met their performance measures. This first government-wide effort to identify and work toward outcomes influenced the three subsequent major pieces of child welfare legislation as well as legislation related to welfare reform.

1994 Amendments to the Social Security Act

In 1994, Congress passed amendments to the Social Security Act, which governs most federal efforts related to child welfare services. The legislation required the

¹⁷ The Center acknowledges the contribution of Terry R. Lewis in drafting this appendix.

Secretary of Health and Human Services to develop regulations for the review of state child and family services programs and to provide technical assistance to the states. It also allowed states the opportunity to develop and implement corrective action plans to deal with areas needing improvement and to avoid withholding federal funds.

In light of the requirement to develop a new review system, the legislation also repealed section 427 of the Social Security Act, which had authorized prior reviews. These reviews were primarily process-oriented and directed at determining state eligibility for funds authorized by Title IV-B. They focused almost entirely on the accuracy and completeness of case files and other records to determine if states were carrying out required administrative legal processes and protections within the required timeframes. The reviews did not assess the effects of those processes and timeframes on the lives of the children and families whom they served, nor did they provide states with enough information or the opportunity to improve outcomes for children and families prior to imposing penalties for noncompliance with requirements.

1994 Multi-Ethnic Placement Act and Amendments

In 1994, Congress passed the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act (MEPA), Public Law 103-382, to forbid the delay or denial of foster care and adoptive placement based on race, color, or national origin of the prospective foster parent, adoptive parent, or adopted child. Congress based this legislation on findings that children, especially minority children, stayed in foster care too long as agencies tried to find placements with parents of similar racial or ethnic backgrounds. The original act allowed states to take into consideration the child's cultural, ethnic, or racial background and the potential for prospective foster and adoptive parents to meet the needs of the child but, in 1996, Congress amended MEPA. The amendment includes a prohibition against delay or denial of placement based on race, color, or national origin and directed the imposition of penalties and corrective actions for any violations by states. MEPA also requires states to make diligent efforts to recruit foster and adoptive parents who reflect the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the children in the foster care system.

1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act

The Public Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, public law 96-272, clearly established a focus on the need for moving children in foster care to permanent homes and the importance of permanency planning and timely decision-making

for these children. In 1997, Congress passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, Public Law 105-89. This law reemphasizes the goals of safety, permanence and well-being of children and families and embodies the following five principles:

- The safety of the child is the paramount concern that must guide all child welfare services.
- Foster care is a temporary setting and not a place for children to grow up.
- Permanency planning efforts for children should begin as soon as a child enters care and should be expedited by the provision of services to families.
- The child welfare system must focus on results and accountability.
- Innovative approaches are needed to achieve the goals of safety, permanency and well-being.

The law is emphatic that the safety of the child is of paramount importance in making decisions related to services, placement, and permanency planning. It reaffirms the importance of making reasonable efforts to preserve and unify families and also specifies that states are not required to make efforts to keep children with their parents when doing so places the child at risk of harm. To ensure the system respects a child's developmental needs, the law includes provisions that shorten the timeframe for making permanency planning decisions and that establish a timeframe for initiating proceedings to terminate parental rights. In general, the law clarifies activities and timeframes that serve to protect, including efforts related to removal of a child, placement in foster care, reviews of that placement and, finally, adoption or reunification.

In addition, the act required the Secretary of Health and Human Services to consult with relevant parties and to develop a set of national outcomes measures for use in assessing the performance of states' child protection and child welfare programs and in meeting the goals of safety, permanency and well-being.

Federal Response to the Legislative Changes

The responsibility for implementing federal child welfare legislation falls to the Children's Bureau, within the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF), the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the Department of Health and Human Services. The Bureau is responsible for assisting states in the delivery of child welfare services designed to protect children and strengthen families. The agency provides grants to states, tribes, and communities to operate

a range of child welfare services including prevention of child abuse and neglect, child protective services, family preservation and support, foster care, adoption, and independent living. In addition, the agency makes major investments in staff training, technology, and innovative programs.

In response to the legislative mandates, the Children's Bureau approached the implementation tasks along two parallel tracks: the development of a process for reviewing state child protection and child welfare systems and the development of a set of national outcomes measures.

Development of the National Outcome Measures

In response to the ASFA legislation, the Children's Bureau established a consultation group that consisted of representatives of state, tribal, county and municipal child welfare agencies; private, nonprofit child and family services agencies; state legislatures; governors' offices; juvenile and family courts; local child advocacy organizations; and a national public employees union. In addition, the Bureau invited representatives of national organizations to serve as resources to the consultation group.

Under the auspices of the Children's Bureau, the consultation group, the resource representatives, and federal staff participated in a series of discussions that resulted in the development of four principles to guide the development of the national outcomes measures. They agreed that the outcomes measures should:

- Reflect performance that is to a large extent within the control of state child welfare systems;
- Be assessed in ways that limit the potential for misinterpretation;
- Be used to assess the continuous improvement of each state over time rather than to compare the performance of states with one another; and
- Be based on data that are available through existing data collection systems in order to limit the reporting burden on the states.

In addition to the development of the guiding principles, the consultation group helped to identify the information about children and families needed to determine how effectively the states were performing, and the Children's Bureau presented information regarding the limited information available in the existing data collection systems. Using the consultation group's guidance and the available information, the Children's Bureau proposed data elements to build outcomes measures.

The Bureau published a draft list of child welfare outcomes and measures in the *Federal Register* for public comment in February 1999 and a final list of revised outcomes and measures in August of that same year. These outcomes and measures provide information on state performance related to safety and permanency. The goal of well-being, however, is not addressed because current federal data collection systems do not gather information related to the education, physical health and mental health of children in care.

As the Children's Bureau and the state child welfare agencies have worked with the data over the past two years, it has become necessary to change some of the outcomes measures, including changes to timeframes for data collection, making revisions to ensure consistency and identifying any measures that are no longer relevant. The agency also intends to add measures related to child and family well-being and make other modifications as the need arises.

Implementation of the performance measurement system depends on state submission of data through the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). Federal staff use data from these systems to calculate the states' performance on the outcomes and measures, as well as national performance standards for the Child and Family Service Review assessments, which are currently set at the 75th percentile of performance. For the Child Welfare Outcomes report, the Bureau shares analyses of the data with the states and invites them to provide comments that may better explain the data. Then it publishes the analyzed data in an annual report, which includes the states' comments. To date, two annual reports on these measures and outcomes for each state have been published: *Child Welfare Outcomes 1998* and *Child Welfare Outcomes 1999*. *Child Welfare Outcomes 2000* is expected in early 2003.

Development and Implementation of the Child and Family Services Review Process

On January 25, 2000, the Department of Health and Human Services published a final regulation governing, among other things, the Child and Family Services State Plan Reviews. The path from the 1994 law mentioned previously to the actual publication of a regulation was long and circuitous, and it may be informative to follow some of the steps in that path.

When Congress passed the 1994 legislation requiring HHS to develop a new federal review process, the responsible federal policymakers realized that they

had an opportunity to use federal reviews to promote and require a high standard of safety, permanency and well-being for children in every state in the country. The agency took on the challenge of developing a review process that could examine outcomes, not process, identify issues and barriers to improvement, and provide a blueprint for state activities that would lead to better practice and improved outcomes for children and families.

Based on information gathered through focus groups and a literature search and state experiences in quality assurance, the Bureau developed draft procedures and instruments and conducted full or partial pilot reviews of child and family services in nine states beginning in 1995 and ending in 1998. In the midst of this developmental work, Congress passed the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, its amendments, and then the Adoption and Safe Families Act. All these pieces of legislation affected the same children and families covered by the reviews and, each time, the Children's Bureau determined that it was critical to make changes in the proposed reviews to include key provisions of the newer pieces of legislation. To do this, the Bureau engaged with the Department's Office of Civil Rights, which would be responsible for enforcement of MEPA, as amended, and also began another series of focus groups related to the implementation of ASFA.

The department published its final regulation governing the new federal review system in the *Federal Register* on January 25, 2000. The final rule spelled out the purposes of reviews to:

- Determine whether or not state child welfare practices, procedures and requirements are achieving desired outcomes for children and families;
- Strengthen federal-state collaboration in achieving improvement in child welfare systems by promoting partnerships between states and the federal government;
- Promote greater public support and collaboration for child and family services within states by requiring participation of committed individuals and organizations outside the state agency in the reviews;
- Review the full range of child and family services, including foster care and adoption, family preservation and support, child protective services, and independent living services;
- Generate a significant amount of useful information on a state's child welfare system, enabling all stakeholders to better understand the issues and areas in need of improvement in child welfare services; and

- Assist the state in improving those services and outcomes for children and families who receive them.

A set of central principles and concepts govern the reviews, including:

- **Accountability.** The review process includes opportunities for states to make program improvements before having federal funds withheld due to noncompliance, although there are significant penalties associated with the failure to make the improvements needed to attain compliance.
- **Collaboration.** Review teams composed of both state and federal staff conduct the reviews and evaluate state performance.
- **Multiple sources of information.** The reviews rely on information from multiple sources, including statewide assessments, onsite reviews of samples of children and families, statewide aggregate data, and interviews with state and community representatives.
- **Outcomes and systems.** The reviews examine state programs from two perspectives: the *outcomes* of services for children and families and *systemic factors* that affect agencies' ability to help children and families achieve positive outcomes.
- **Strengths and needs.** The reviews identify both the strengths and needs of state programs with a strong emphasis on using the reviews to drive program improvements.
- **Practice.** The reviews promote practice principles that support improved outcomes for children and families, including family-centered practice, community-based services, strengthening parental capacity to protect and provide for their children, and individualizing services that respond to the unique needs of children and families.

The Child and Family Services Review Process

There are two phases in the review: a statewide assessment and an on-site review. States manage their own statewide assessments during the six-month periods prior to onsite reviews. Federal staff also analyze state data including indicators that address safety and permanency issues for children. Federal staff transmit state data profiles to the states for use in compiling their statewide assessments. These assessments guide decisions about the on-site reviews, such as the locations in each state where on-site review activities will occur and the composition of the sample of cases for review.

Teams of state and federal staff, with other state representatives and expert peer reviewers from other states carry out on-site reviews. On-site reviews consist of one week on-site visits for intensive reviews of 30-50 cases per state, including interviews with parents, foster parents, children if appropriate, case workers, service providers, other parties to the cases reviewed, and other interviews with state and community representatives who inform the review team about states' child and family services programs.

The reviews examine outcomes for children and families in three areas: safety, permanency, and child and family well-being. Within these three areas, seven outcomes are assessed through statewide data and reviews of cases, as follows:

Safety:

- Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect.
- Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Permanency:

- Children have permanency and stability in their living situations.
- The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.

Well-being:

- Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs.
- Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs
- Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

The reviews also examine seven systemic factors that affect the quality of services delivered to children and families and the outcomes they experience. The statewide assessments include states' evaluations of federal requirements related to each systemic factor. During the on-site reviews, reviewers interview selected state and community stakeholders to determine how well each of the systemic factors functions in the state under review. The seven systemic factors are:

- Statewide information system;
- Service array;

- Quality assurance system;
- Case review system;
- Agency responsiveness to the community;
- Staff training; and
- Foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention.

Federal staff make separate determinations about states' conformity on each of the seven outcomes and seven systemic factors following the on-site reviews and confirm determinations of conformity to the states in a written report. A scoring system that reviewers use in reviewing cases sets the standard for "conformity" on the outcomes measures at 90 percent of the sample of cases.

For any of the outcomes or systemic factors in which federal staff determine that a state is not in substantial conformity, that State must develop and implement a program improvement plan (PIP) designed to correct the area of nonconformity. Penalties associated with nonconformity are suspended while states implement approved PIPs. The penalties will be rescinded if states are successful in ending the nonconformity through completion of their PIPs.

The Child Welfare Outcomes and The Child and Family Services Reviews

Although they were developed by the Children's Bureau in response to separate congressional mandates, both the Child Welfare Outcomes reports and the reviews address outcomes for children and families. The Children's Bureau designed these activities so that the two reporting processes complement each other and make maximum use of the same indicators. The annual reports allow states to examine change and progress in the years in which no review is scheduled. Because the AFCARS and NCANDS data on which the annual reports are based do not include attention to child and family well-being outcomes, future editions of the Child Welfare Outcomes Report will rely on findings from the Child and Family Service Reviews to report on those measures related to children's educational, health, and mental health status while in the care of child welfare agencies.

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